

***Towards 2010: Centenary of Edinburgh 1910***  
***Commission VIII***  
***Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity***

The mandate of Commission Eight represented one of the two central aims of the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference. “Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World” (Commission One) necessitated “Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity” if the goal of “plant(ing) in every non-Christian nation one united Church of Christ”(131) was to be achieved. Commission Eight addressed this latter concern. It was the most ecumenically focussed of the Edinburgh 1910 Commissions – though the word “ecumenical” does not appear in the Report – and it justified the Conference’s subsequent reputation as the “symbolic beginning of the modern ecumenism.” (Kinnamon, M. and B.Cope (eds), *The Ecumenical Movement: an Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1997, p.1.)

The Commission was chaired by an experienced Scottish colonial administrator Sir Andrew Fraser formerly governor of Bengal. It included four bishops, and church mission boards were as strongly represented as autonomous missionary societies. Although the Commission took evidence from less than one hundred correspondents – considerably fewer than other Commissions – they included a larger percentage of persons who could speak on behalf of missionary boards and societies that they represented. While avoiding any semblance of speaking on behalf of churches, or of addressing them officially, the Report reflected the “desire for closer fellowship, and for the healing of the broken unity of the Church of Christ” that challenged churches, church mission boards, and missionary societies, at home and overseas. (131)

The Report divided its subject into five main chapters: Comity, Conferences, Joint Action, Federation and Union, and Cooperation at the Home Base. Mainly descriptive in character, they were introduced and concluded with two chapters that gave an insightful analysis of the hindrances and horizons of cooperation and unity. Twelve appendices comprise an invaluable archive of documents relating to the promotion of unity among churches, and cooperation between churches and missions in Asia – China, India, the Philippines, and Japan. These support the main argument of the Report: that Christians in these regions were “the first to recognise the need for concerted action and closer fellowship”(133), and that their pioneering action called for “heartly sympathy (on the part of western churches) with the movements toward unity in the mission field.”(144)

The flow of the Report began with a frank discussion of comity – i.e. the friendly and courteous recognition by one missionary society of the integrity and disciplines of another working in the same or proximate places. The principle of comity was first enunciated by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1838. Its repetition by many subsequent missionary conferences evidenced the continuing need for “delimitation” among missions to avoid proselytism, duplication, and waste of resources. Delimitation took both territorial and denominational forms. The migration of indigenous Christians, their freedom of choice, and their desire to evolve new forms of ecclesiastical identity made some forms of comity obsolete. While concluding that the principle of comity was still valid, the Report urged that comity agreements should be considered expedient rather than permanent, and that “the preservation of comity...must lead to federation or some form of unity.”(19)

The Report then considered missionary conferences as “indispensable preliminaries to all developments of cooperative action or ecclesiastical approximation.”(28) The range of missionary conferences were brought under review: local meetings; wider associations dealing with a particular areas of work or with more general missionary concerns; geographical or national groupings; informal conferences for discussion and meditation; and formal “general conferences” that gathered missionaries and indigenous Christians regionally or internationally. The Report distinguished between “inter-missionary” and “inter-mission” conferences: the former had informal constitutions and included missionaries as individuals, while the latter involved “definite representation of the

Missions...as corporate units.”(32) Inter-missionary gatherings demonstrated “numerical strength for purposes of conference and fellowship,” while inter-mission conferences achieved “weight and authority for purposes of action.”(32) The Report concluded that each was valuable in “the realisation of new fellowship and essential unity...that underlie and transcend all differences.”(50-51)

In the chapter on “Joint Action”, the Report reviewed missionary activities that was either initiated or sustained by such conferences. First and foremost it instanced the interdenominational and international Bible Societies as “the foremost among cooperative institutions”(53), whose work of Bible translation and distribution had, over many decades, tested and vindicated “the value of cooperation.”(56) Education was also praised as a branch of missionary activity in which joint action is “feasible and manifestly desirable.”(73) Special mention was made of the Dutch “Missionary Consulate” in Java as an example of separate missions electing a single representative to mediate with the colonial government.

While efficiency was a self-evident value of joint action, the Report emphasised that missionary cooperation was motivated by a higher goal: namely, “to plant in each non-Christian nation one undivided Church of Christ.”(83) In its chapter on “Federation and Union” the Report amassed evidence from missionaries and indigenous Christians, especially in Asia, of “movements in the direction of unity.”(83) In China the lead was being taken by Chinese Christian leaders for whom “the sense of a common national life and a common Christianity is stronger than the appreciation of (denominational) differences which had their origin in controversies remote from the Church in mission lands.”(84) Respecting the theological integrity of many ecclesiastical differences, but eager to respond constructively to Asian Christian realities, the Report phrased itself with care: “In the supreme work of laying foundations of national Church...it is impossible that missionaries should refrain from giving the indigenous churches such help and counsel as they can that is part of their inheritance from the past.”(87) Organic unity among churches of common polity was relatively straightforward. Progress toward interdenominational unity was more difficult, though significant advances had been achieved in China, India and East Africa. The Report was equally appreciative of “federations of Christian bodies which regard organic union as impracticable or undesirable,”(107) yet still promote the ideal of unity in an “experimental stage.”(117)

In its final chapter the Report turned its attention to the “Home Base”. It asserted that “movements toward unity in the mission field cannot proceed far without cooperation and support for those responsible for missionary administration at home.”(119) If this betrays a sense of *real politik*, it was also intended to challenge mission boards and societies in the West where progress toward unity was slower than in Asia. Promising progress was reported from North America and the Continent, but Britain lagged behind. The Report recommended greater unity across the “home base” in the interests of promoting “one united Church of Christ in every non-Christian nation,” and “the healing of divisions” in the West. (131)

The Report thus moved to its main recommendation: that “some plan should be found of maintaining permanently the closer relations between missionary societies throughout the world into which they have been brought by the work of this (Edinburgh 1910) Conference.”(129) Conceding the Commission’s limits, it confined itself to recommending a “Continuing Committee” comprising elected delegates of the Conference, with agreed powers to consult and advise in taking forward the Conference concerns. It emphasised that the Continuing Committee should be authorised “to confer with the Societies and Boards as to the best method of working towards the formation of a permanent International Missionary Committee.”(144)

The recommendation was unanimously approved by the Conference plenary on 21<sup>nd</sup> June. The foundation on which the International Missionary Council would stand had been laid – though its creation was delayed until 1921 on account of the First World War. The delegates sang the doxology.

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