

## **LOCAL CHURCHES TRULY UNITED: THE VISION AND THE WAY.**

### **The 2nd St. Thomas of India Lecture.**

By Dr. Christopher Duraisingh of the W.C.C.'s Commission on World Evangelism.

*The lecture was given in Aberystwyth, Milton Keynes and Edinburgh in 1994. Dr. Duraisingh's vision grew in response to his hearers in these places and to others since. The following is a brief synopsis of the lecture as it was delivered at Milton Keynes.*

Dr. Duraisingh's concern was to express and encourage the commitment and passion for that unity which is God's will for the Church and for humankind; and to reaffirm that its fundamental focus is in the local church.

For all the sheer amount of modern world ecumenical effort, he yet had a nagging feeling for the truth of a comment that much of our ecumenical concern is "for ecumenicism within the status quo".

Today, he said, there is a geographical shift in the Christian world from north to south. Increasing percentages of Christians are found in the independent and charismatic churches and the ecumenical movement does not concern them. And he spoke of how, in India, there is for some a deep sense of disquiet and frustration within the C.S.I. and the C.N.I., even quoting a senior church leader there to the effect that structural union had not meant much and had tended to concentrate power in a hierarchy.

A new ecumenical reality has to be explored. Dr. Duraisingh believed that it is in forms of Christian community which arise at the frontiers of society and in their search for justice, peace and integrity of creation that we shall find the passion, witness and commitment we need to overcome the stalemate in the ecumenical process.

The world cries out in agony, the gap widens between rich and poor, and one of the most characteristic features of today's world is the emergence of new forms of divisiveness, new group identities; and those most damaged are precisely the poorest, the weakest, the most vulnerable.

Christians around the world have to demonstrate through visible unity the possibility of that community which God wills for all humanity; and to do this across cultures and narrow identities based on ethnic and religious chauvinism.

**A Response: Local Churches Truly United: The Vision and the Way**

Dr. Duraisingh quoted the 1973 Salamanca text, later adapted in Nairobi, beginning as it does: "The one church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united"; it continues with the shared characteristics of that one church and its "common commitment to confess the Gospel of Christ by proclamation and service to the world"; and it ends with "its relationship with sister churches expressed in conciliar gatherings whenever required for the fulfilment of the common calling".

He suggested there had been damaging misunderstanding and misuse of this text. Weaker, more palatable alternatives had been found. But that text, he said, brought together two interrelated affirmations: first, the famous phrase of the New Delhi 1961 meeting: "all in each place", which expressed the unity of all Christians in a local context; and, second, what was emphasised at Uppsala in 1968: the catholicity of the universal dimension of churches in every and all places through conciliar councils. Dr Duraisingh saw the evasion of commitment to full union arising because even the demise of Western Christendom leaves almost intact the desire for separate identity. He quoted Bishop Lesslie Newbigin on this unwillingness to give up identity as a form of illicit syncretism with the ideology of individualism and privatised religion.

### **How then shall we recognise the vision: local churches truly united among themselves and having relationship with each other through conciliar councils?**

1. The point of departure must be the emphasis upon the local church: the experience and expression of the local church is the proving ground of that unity which we proclaim.

2. The common concern in ecumenical circles for doctrinal convergence does not enthuse large numbers of the laity, and is questioned by many theologians - black, feminist, Asian and others. They believe that we shall have no true unity until and unless, alongside of doctrinal concerns, we also begin to articulate forms of unity among Christians as they express their solidarity with one another in the local context and the common struggle for justice.

So the proper question is not how do we unite? But, rather, if we are to mediate the liberating, uniting presence of God in a particular place, what kind of structure shall we need together?

3. It is in the local search for unity that we shall be able to incorporate all Christians in a given area particularly those who are outside the mainline churches. Thus the unity of the church will become not simply an end in

itself but a sign, a foretaste and an instrument of unity among humankind for Hindus, Muslims and all of us.

4. This emphasis reminds us that there are many people, who are passionately involved in peace movements and other various causes; we need to discover their potential within a uniting and united church.

### **What then is the local church?**

A church is a theological event created by the continuing presence of the Risen Christ, a happening where people of God in a given place credibly and tangibly mediate God's presence and thus make known the uniting and liberating power of that presence in a broken and fragmented world.

So, the term refers to an area where Christians can easily meet and form one community fellowship in witness and service. Each local church may have one or more eucharistic celebrations, and may include different types of Christian community, as long as all understand themselves as belonging to one eucharistic fellowship normally presided over by a bishop or moderator; and there will also need to be viable provision for oversight.

### **The question of uniformity or diversity**

The fear that organic union promotes an unhealthy uniformity is a genuine fear. We do therefore need to honour that diversity which God wills for us; as was said long ago, this unity will be that of a living organism with a diversity that is characteristic of the members of a living body.

### **What then of our separate identities?**

Dr. Duraisingh offered a parable: here in the U.K., he said, he is sometimes given 'curried chicken': this means there is added to the chicken a little bit of chilli, some curry powder, perhaps raisins - that sort of thing; all the bits are added here and there and finally you don't know what it is. But 'chicken curry' is a different process: none of the various ingredients remains in its original identity, they all blend together and a new identity emerges. That is the unity for which we search a complex and not a composite unity.

### **Must doctrine divide?**

Consensus on every doctrinal issue is not a prerequisite for the union of churches. Trust is needed by each part in the integrity of the other.

### **Conclusion**

"Let me finally add that as I have looked at the unity scene in the U.K., especially among Local Ecumenical Projects, I have seen tremendous possibilities. We need to go back and revalidate and reappropriate the central theme of the ecumenical movement that the proving ground for that movement is the local church. Our essential goal therefore is local churches truly united, meeting together from time to time in conciliar council at the larger national level. This will be costly, will involve risk and will take courage, commitment and resolve."

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