

THE EDINBURGH 2010 WORLD MISSION CONFERENCE WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO US? Impressions of a Catholic Delegate to an Ecumenical Conference

By John F. Gorski, M.M.

I returned recently from what many consider to have been a very important ecclesial event, “Edinburgh 2010”, which celebrated the centenary of the famous World Mission Conference of 1910. Why was that event important? In missiological and ecumenical circles it is considered to have been the historical origin of the modern ecumenical movement, which the Second Vatican Council regarded as a great work of the Holy Spirit. What I perceived in these days and weeks was a general ignorance of the Edinburgh Conference itself and a certain indifference regarding its significance. It is from that perspective that I present this report.

The 1910 Edinburgh Conference was quite different from the one that just recently concluded. That one brought together some 1,200 representatives of Protestant missions world-wide. Except for a handful of Asians, whose input was critical, all the delegates were Caucasian Europeans and North Americans, with none from Latin America or Africa. All were Protestants; no Catholics or Orthodox were invited. Presumably they were “main-line” Protestants (the Pentecostals and Independent Evangelicals were just starting to break off from the established churches). Some described the composition of the gathering as “male and pale” (women and youth were almost totally absent).

They met in mid-June in the theater-like Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland, of course with no air conditioning. They listened to some 300 discourses proposing ways to Christianize the entire world in their generation, or at least in the 20th century. But the historically significant result of the encounter was the shared awareness that the main obstacle to evangelization and conversions was the division among the various missionary churches and agencies. A divided Christianity was a scandal to non Christians, who would say: “If you all claim to be disciples of the same Lord Jesus Christ, why then do you constantly try to destroy each other’s work? The prayer of Jesus that his disciples be one that the world might believe in Him (John 17, 20-21) at this time emerged as the foundational motivation for promoting Christian unity. This awareness prompted enough of the participants in the Conference to engage in initiatives to promote unity among Christians, the movement generally called “ecumenism” among the historical churches (this term has negative resonances for many Pentecostals and conservative Evangelicals). Ecumenism was born not as an end in itself. It was Christian unity *for the sake of world mission*.

Steps in the path toward Christian unity

The major historical and structural consequence of the 1910 Edinburgh Mission Conference was the eventual founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC), but this did not come about right away. This resulted from the founding of three organized movements that later joined together and became the WCC. The first grouping, founded in 1921, was the International Missionary Council, which brought together mission sending societies or agencies rather than churches as such. It was integrated into the WCC some years after its founding, in 1961. It was

the first concrete organism that promoted international and interconfessional cooperation in mission. A few years later, in 1925, the “Life and Action” movement, oriented toward social issues was founded. Then two years later came the “Faith and Order” movement concerned with questions of doctrine, ministry and worship that affected Christian unity. These two groups merged for the founding of the WCC, originally projected for 1938 but forcibly delayed to 1948 because of the Second World War. The International Missionary Council joined them in the WCC in 1961. Because of the perceived social activism and theological liberalism of the WCC and the inherent tendency of Evangelicals to insist on their independence, the WCC practically became an organism uniting Protestant “main-line” churches. A number of Orthodox churches joined in 1963, insisting on their duty to witness faithfully to their authentic tradition.

Exactly 50 years ago, the Roman Church formally entered into the “ecumenical movement” with Pope John XXIII’s founding of the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity (since 1983 the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, or PCPCU), an organism he considered indispensable for the preparation and realization of the Second Vatican Council. Paul VI decided it was also needed for the follow up of the Council and the ongoing promotion of Christian unity. Since then the Council has engaged in formal dialogues and doctrinal studies as well as other forms of collaboration with practically all other Christian churches and ecclesial communities.

One of the major reasons to attribute significance and importance to the Edinburgh 2010 Mission Conference is that it brought together for the first time not only the main-line or historical Christian churches (Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic) but also many groups of Pentecostals, Evangelicals and “Independents”, who formerly maintained their distance from the established ecumenical movement. It is significant that *it was the cause of world mission that brought all these different types of Christians together.*

The organization of Edinburgh 2010

It seemed obvious to anyone familiar with the historical development of mission and of ecumenism that a centennial celebration of the 1910 Conference was necessary. But how to organize this? What religious institution or group of church bodies would be capable or should be entrusted with the task of organizing the centenary event? I guess the WCC could have done it. It was a concrete fruit of the 1910 Conference. Also, many Orthodox Churches had joined the WCC since 1963 and collaborative relations between itself and the Roman Catholic Church have developed since Vatican II. Nevertheless, many Christian groups (Pentecostals, conservative Evangelicals and Independent churches) committed to missionary activity and who now constitute the fastest growing type of Christians, did not have positive relations with the WCC. Somehow, somebody came up with the brilliant idea of setting up a “General Council of Stakeholders” that would be responsible for organizing Edinburgh 2010. It brought together the representatives of 19 ecclesial bodies that sponsored the event, including the WCC, the Vatican’s PCPCU, Orthodox Christians, various British church groups, the Anglican communion, world federations of Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist and Methodist and Adventist churches, the Lausanne Evangelicals, Pentecostals, African Independent Churches and a few academic groups. No single “stakeholder” group was seen to dominate the Conference. Pentecostals and Evangelicals were as visible in leadership roles as were those of the “historical” churches.

The delegates to Edinburgh 2010

For obvious logistical and practical reasons, the 2010 Conference was designed to be much smaller than the 1910 event, with its 1,200 participants. Until the last couple of months, the number of participants was set at 250 delegates (the number later was increased to 290). Of these, 70 representatives of the “stakeholders” who had particular organizational responsibilities were present in an “ex officio” way. Another 180 persons were invited from global Christianity. There were only 22 Catholic delegates, 6 of these from the United States. I really felt honored to have received an invitation, but it wasn’t as a U.S. delegate. Towards the end of the Conference I was told that the invitation came from the General Council itself in recognition of my missiological work in Latin America. A list of the 290 delegates was distributed, but a detailed breakdown is not available at this writing. One the last day I was told by a staff person that one third were women (to me it appeared more like a half; their presence was indeed impressive). Many of the delegates held some position of church authority, and apparently a larger number, including myself, were involved in mission studies. Some Pentecostal delegates felt that the “academic voices of the North” could “wash away the narrative claims of the South”. Being acquainted with both linguistic traditions, they felt they could play an important role as bridge builders.

The Conference theme and program

Edinburgh 2010’s theme was “Witnessing to Christ Today”. The word “together” could have been inserted appropriately in that phrase. The Conference was prepared by hundreds of people working together over three years to identify and shape key themes to be discussed in workshop groups on in the event itself. Although voting was not taken on the final “Common Call” a spirit of consensus was clearly perceptible.

What struck me as a very important aspect of the Conference was the experience of spending a lot of time in prayer together. The inaugural act on the evening of June 2 was predominantly a prayer service, as were the initial sessions of each of the following days. Another hour was spent in scriptural reflections, a kind of shared “lectio divina”. I don’t want to be disrespectful, but a secularized observer might say we “wasted a lot of time” praising God. Of course it’s because Christians are glad that God is God and want to share their experience of him with all the people of the world. From my Latin American experience I would say the ambience was like that of our Mission Congresses (the 8 “Comla’s” or 3 “CAM’s”), the last of which was celebrated in Quito in 2008 with a well-prepared U.S. delegation. It was not like other international missiology congresses that I attended over the years in a university context.

The principal objective was not to make academic progress in mission studies. Nevertheless an integral part of the Conference was a two-year study program in which Christians of all traditions and from all parts of the globe prepared presentations to stimulate group discussion in nine major themes. I was assigned to “Track One” which shared reflections on the Foundations of Mission, Mission and Unity and Mission Spirituality. Other themes dealt with Forms of Engagement, Mission and Power, Christian Communities, Mission and Other Faiths, Theological Education and Mission and Post-modernities. Although the Conference did have a solid component of missiological reflection, it was not basically a workshop about mission theory. It

was rather a precious opportunity for delegates of all denominations to share joyfully with others the rich experience of their commitment to evangelizing the peoples of the world.

A “Common Call” to Mission

The fruit of the different study groups, affirmed in the concluding assembly, was a “Common Call” expressed in nine points. Theologically it expressed a faith in the mission of the Triune God, with confidence in the uniqueness of salvation in Christ and transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Salvation in Christ was described as an integral reality with dimensions of forgiveness, reconciliation, life in abundance and liberation for all poor and oppressed. Missionary witness is expressed in reconciliation, hospitality, zeal for justice, peace and the protection of the environment, culminating in liturgical praise. The social justice commitment of conservative Evangelicals and Pentecostals was firm, in stark contrast to the popularized stereotyped image of them to the contrary.

There was a clear recognition of the new context of Christian mission a century after the 1910 Conference. At that time two thirds of the world’s Christians lived in Europe and North America. Mission was “from the West to the rest”. Now, thanks to extensive mission efforts during the 20th century, the great majority live in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Christians from these continents, many of them migrants, are becoming a new missionary force. There is a new thrust of mission from the global South to the North. While previous generations of missionaries were often “professionals”, some with an academic background, ordinary lay persons well formed in their Christian identity are assuming a new protagonism in mission. The idea of “mission from everywhere to everywhere” was heard time and again in the conference. Particular emphasis was given to the missionary formation of young people, starting in childhood.

Some areas of particular significance from a Catholic perspective

As the Conference came to an end, some of us Catholic delegates perceived areas of progress both in the understanding of mission and in ecumenical relations with other Christians.

We Catholics, together with the Orthodox, confer a particular value to the historical tradition of the Christian faith and thus consider theological reflection and formation to be important. Protestants, on the other hand, tend to minimize human mediations and “merely human traditions” because of the importance given to the pure message of the Bible. Although Anglicans, Lutherans, Reformed/Presbyterians and other mainline Protestants have given importance to theology, those of Pentecostal, conservative Evangelical and Independent denominations (now the majority of Protestants, strong in their missionary thrust) have tended to minimize formalism in theology and ritual. I’ve often heard the phrase “doctrines divide but actions unite”. Now due the experience of ecumenical encounters, dialogues and structured relations many “free church” Christians now recognize the importance of theological education. We Catholics in turn have become more biblical in our theology. In particular, the common search for the biblical foundations of mission has led to joint theological reflection. Likewise, the experience of praying together leads to a valuing of liturgical traditions.

Another area of progress was the affirmation our common membership in the one Body of Christ through baptism. Formed by the Second Vatican Council and the teaching of Popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, we Catholics have learned to grow in our understanding of our relation with other Christians. We used to characterize them as schismatics or heretics. Then we called them “separated brethren”. Now we emphasize the real but imperfect communion that we have with them because of our common faith in Christ and our baptism in his name. The affirmation of this by “free church” Protestants is indeed significant. Many of them have considered Catholics, Orthodox and mainline Protestants as the theological equivalents of pagans because we were baptized in infancy without an explicit act of faith. Their recognition of our baptism is indeed a significant step in the path to Christian unity.

Pope John Paul II proposed a “mutual sharing of the gifts” received in history from the Holy Spirit by the different Christian communities as a methodology to follow in the path toward union. We no longer look back as an ideal to a unity that presumably existed (perhaps more imagined than real) 1000 or 500 years ago. In a spirit of repentance we recognize our sins and errors that have hurt others and contributed to division. But we also recognize that since our historical separations the Holy Spirit has continued to shower his gifts on all the disciples of Christ, as persons and as communities, drawing us to a greater faithfulness to the Gospel and to a more authentic witness to the peoples of the world. Our eventual and desired communion is principally a work of the Holy Spirit, one that calls for our cooperation. The Edinburgh 2010 Conference calls on all Christians to “welcome one another in our diversity” and to “draw on one another’s unique charisms”, challenging each other to grow in faith and understanding.

These positive steps toward the desired unity among Christians at Edinburgh were made possible because of the explicitly missionary focus of the Conference. It is the evangelization of the peoples of the world, more than any other motivation, which is capable of bringing Christians closer to one another in mutual love, progressing to a common faith. After all, Jesus prayed that his disciples be one not just because fellowship is good, but in order that the world may believe in him and have life in its fullness.

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