

TOWARDS THE SECOND
ASSEMBLY OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
1954

Ecumenical Studies

INTRODUCING THE ASSEMBLY TOPIC
EVANGELISM:
THE CHURCH'S NEGLECTED VOCATION

Introductory Leaflet No. 2

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EVANGELISM

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH TO THOSE OUTSIDE HER LIFE

FOREWORD

The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches to be held at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, U. S. A. in August, 1954, will be of singular importance in the history of the ecumenical movement. It will be the first Assembly since the World Council was constituted at Amsterdam in 1948, and will thus be a testing point for this ecumenical venture. Have the Churches which are members of the World Council of Churches learned "to stay together"? Have we learned to understand each other better than before? Have we learned to be witnesses of Christ and his Church in this world?

As the main theme for the next Assembly the Central Committee of the World Council has chosen "*The Christian Hope*".* The meaning of the message of the Christian Hope for the present situation of the Church and the world will be dealt with under six subsidiary subjects: *Faith and Order*, *Evangelism*, *Social Questions*, *International Affairs*, *Inter-group Relations* and *The Laity*. Introductory study leaflets have been prepared for these Assembly subjects and the following is a copy of the leaflet on the subject:

"Evangelism: the Mission of the Church to those outside her Life".

All over the world *Evangelism* has received new emphasis in recent years, as the primary function of the Church and the main concern of the Christian. Yet there is evidence of a growing sense of frustration and an increasing awareness of the Church's failure to evangelise. It will be the task of the Assembly section on Evangelism to attempt a realistic review of this situation. What are the main obstacles in the life and theology of the churches which hinder them from becoming and acting like the apostolic band which Christ intended his Church to be? What kind of structure should a church have which resolutely endeavours to live up to its missionary obligations? These are two of the many questions that must be considered. The purpose of this introductory leaflet is to indicate the various issues which need to be studied in the churches both before and at the Assembly. A similar leaflet is available on each of the other five topics, a list of which will be found at the end of this paper. These leaflets are intended for wide circulation and use in the churches and we invite all those interested to read and comment on them. Further information about how you can participate in the pre-Assembly studies on this and other topics will be found at the end of this leaflet.

* The final formulation to be decided at the Central Committee in January 1953.

I.

EVANGELISM — THE CHURCH'S NEGLECTED VOCATION

"Evangelism". Few words in the Church's vocabulary are more familiar. Few words are more misunderstood.

Evangelism is derived from a word which, in the language of the New Testament, denotes the good news that God has in Christ visited this world to transform it into the theatre of His glory. This message is one of hope for a world suffering under the rule of sin and of death. The Church is set in this world to proclaim the good news of hope in word and deed to all men, in every moment and in every situation, however seemingly hopeless. Whenever this hope has faded, the Church has been tempted to isolate itself from the world, as if it had no message for it. It became introverted and "churchy". Wherever, however, this Christian hope has been a living power, the Church has gone forth fearlessly into the world. It became a witnessing Church, an "evangelising" Church. Witnessing then became not merely one of the Church's activities, but that toward which its total energy was oriented and directed.

On sober examination, however, we discover that the popular conception of evangelism today is something quite different. It is true that no church worthy of the name fails, at least in words, to acknowledge evangelism as its prime vocation in the world. But we may well ask how much of the widely prevailing enthusiasm for evangelism is actually, in many churches, one of lip service or one reminiscent of former days, instead of a living concern? Is it not a fact that the very word evangelism often connotes merely a specialised church activity? And is not the word "evangelist" frequently thought to refer to a very specialised calling indeed — that of the itinerant mass-meeting revivalist, or, more rarely, that of a missionary to distant lands?

Something must have gone wrong when a vocation which should be the characteristic mark of the Church as a whole, and of every individual Christian, is looked upon as a rare, intermittent, and sometimes even queer specialty. Even as a specialised activity it may, of course, have a place in the life of the Church, though there are many indications that it no longer meets the needs of our age as it did those of a past generation. The effectiveness of a "revival" — since that is the popular equation — depends upon the presence of something to revive. Appreciation of the value of such "revival" campaigns must be accompanied by honest questionings. Is the evangelistic campaign addressed to baptised members of the Church? If so, what does conversion mean? If addressed to the unbaptised, is conversion to lead to life within the Spirit-bearing Body? Is the agent of evangelism the prophet-preacher, or is it the community of faith itself, the professional evangelist being merely its spokesman?

Clearly, the decision "for Christ" customarily thought of as synonymous with conversion, cannot be left in the air as a frail subjective experience. Yet, provided the Church is to enter into the conversion story somewhere — if

not as agent, then at least as the future spiritual home of the convert — is the Church ready for even this secondary vocation? Someone engaged in evangelistic service in the mass-world has stated that “the spiritual poverty and unpreparedness of the Church is such that no one can desire a large number of those now outside to enter the churches as they are”.

EVANGELISM AND MISSIONS

The conviction that the churches, as they face their evangelising task, are called to submit to self-examination can be strengthened by a further fact. It would be difficult to differentiate in essential meaning the evangelising from the missionary calling of the Church. The latter, too, has come to connote a specialty, handed over to a few. In days when, in the Western world, the home community as a whole could still be thought of as Christian, when Christendom was still a reality and when the non-converted world was still geographically remote, such delegation of the missionary vocation may have been defensible. Can anyone pretend that we live in a converted Christendom today? Missions and evangelism both cry for rescue from what has been termed the “Christendom illusion”. Both need to become once more corporate activities of the Church which is itself Christ’s agent of salvation. Even the younger churches are not exempt from the call to missions and evangelism. Precisely because they have not been victims of the “Christendom illusion”, they may, indeed, now become the pioneers in discovering new ways of presenting the Gospel to the unconverted.

“We have to confess with deep penitence”, so reads a recent World Council pamphlet on *The Calling of the Church to Mission and Unity*, in which the word evangelism could parallel the word mission, “that the normal life of our churches does *not* express the truth that to be a Christian is necessarily to be involved in a mission to the whole world. The average congregation is apt to be an introverted community which does not think primarily of its obligation to bring the knowledge of Christ to its whole neighbourhood, and to the whole world, and this introversion is apt to mark the life, thought, and leadership of the whole Church”. Even normal theological study and teaching, according to this indictment, “largely presupposes a static, rather than a missionary Church”. “We are led to believe”, the appeal concludes, “that God is forcing His Church to come out into the open and to commit itself afresh in a dynamic encounter with the world”. The suggestion has been voiced that the term “engagement” could replace the word evangelism as less subject to misunderstanding.

THE CALL TO REFORM WITHIN

The recovery of the evangelising power of the Church may, accordingly, depend first of all upon reform within. “The most powerful agency of the mission” — and, one could add, of evangelism — “during the third century was the Church herself”. Thus the historian Harnack explains the dynamic of the Gospel’s march across the ancient world. In other words, the missionary Church, not the individual, or the individual only as a member of the evangelising Body of Christ, was God’s chief instrument of redemption.

The subject for the Assembly section on Evangelism has been defined as: *The Mission of the Church to Those Outside her Life*. As the churches confront this momentous task, armies will be needed, not merely the isolated foot-soldier or the professional volunteer. Are the churches prepared to enlist for this engagement — one not merely “against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places”?

THE RIVAL RELIGIONS OF OUR TIME

Clearly, we are living in a day when the vocation of evangelism cannot be confined to the conversion of individuals, but when we are in the midst of a war between rival communities of faith, rival “churches”, rival hosts of spiritual power.

Whole sections of populations which, only a few generations ago were still at least nominally Christian, have become totally alienated from the Church. Other groups have appeared in our century of social turmoil who have never been in living contact with the Gospel. Still others, as in Asia and Africa, are under the sway of the ancient religions of those continents and have not even heard the Gospel. These have not lost a hunger for salvation nor a search for an anchorage for human hopes, but they now seek salvation and hope elsewhere than in institutional Christianity. The Communist rival to the Christian Gospel is one obvious example. In the Western world, scientific humanism is an equally dangerous rival. A secular eschatology of hope — a faith in a Second Coming of a utopian Golden Age — has replaced the Christian hope in the saving Advent of the Son of God. In all lands the underprivileged are on the march.

If accused of indifference to the Christian Gospel, they hurl the reproach of indifference to the poor back upon their accusers. Nor can it be disputed that the membership of the Christian congregations, particularly in the older churches, consists mainly of the privileged classes of modern society. In the “Battle of Hope” the privileged are under a handicap even though their privileged position may be due to circumstances rather than to their own fault. Nevertheless the Word of God, voiced by the Prophet Amos, calls men to self-examination and penitence: “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, that chant to the sound of viols and anoint themselves, but are not grieved for the affliction of the people” (Amos 6:1, 5, 6).

THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH UNDER JUDGMENT

There are growing indications that the churches, both older and younger, are becoming aware of the momentous social revolutions of contemporary history. In this awareness lies the promise of a better future. As the churches submit themselves to judgment, what are some of the indictments to which they may be compelled to listen?

THE INTROVERSION OF THE CHURCH

One of the most obvious of these indictments has already been mentioned — the introversion of the average Christian congregation. The “Christendom illusion” haunts us here. In a community in which every citizen

is under Christian shepherding, each flock might be permitted to put first its own worship comfort, its own budget prosperity, its own social solidarity. Has a parish this right when it is a mission outpost in an alien and lost world, a battle-ground, instead of a sanctuary for the faint-hearted? Have the churches taken their own self-culture too seriously; have they forgotten that they are instruments of God's purpose to redeem the *world*? The Church, so prophetic voices are insisting, must be broken open from within, so that it may emerge once more as a witnessing community. Nothing short of a revolution may be required in many a congregation as it recaptures this insight into the meaning of its own existence under God.

THE CLASS ISOLATION OF THE CHURCHES

Related to the problem of introversion is the closed class character of many of the churches. A vivid, and even startling, phrase is coming into use, particularly in European studies in evangelism, to describe this cultural isolation: "the Church a bourgeois ghetto". Class exclusiveness varies from country to country. In some — the United States and Canada, for example — the word proletariat is scarcely known, all classes participating in bourgeois characteristics. Nor have we the right to declare all these characteristics sinful as such. Some receive praise in the New Testament. Yet it is the responsibility of the Church to enter into the common life of all men and not to stand culturally aloof. Class isolation, worldly entrance requirements, the insistence upon cultural conversion, philanthropic care for the poor instead of accepting them into the congregation or crusading for justice on their behalf, are often noted by outsiders as marks of contemporary churches. Many churches are selective — or, as an Americanism has it, "choosy" — in their choice of members. Some even practise openly the bribery of social acceptance, a travesty, surely, of true evangelism. In countries riven by class strife, the "bourgeois ghetto" of the churches is a tragic fact indeed, and is increasingly recognised as probably the major obstacle to the conversion of the working class. Even when courageous Christians recognise in penitence the call to surrender exclusiveness of class, they frequently find themselves imprisoned within walls of custom, or even of language. Class barriers, in some parts of the Western world, have become as powerful in separating men as are the chasms between Christianity and pagan religions in the lands of the younger churches.

THE ECLIPSE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Related further to the Church's introversion and its cultural exclusiveness is the eclipse of the Christian community. If a church can yield to the temptation of selective evangelising, the church member or prospective convert can be selective also, particularly in lands where the disunity of the Church presents him with the luxury of denominational choice. He need never meet his next-door neighbour in a common worship of God, and can escape responsibility for his non-Christian neighbour by leaving him to the care of his own social group. Many a church is no longer a community, nor the community a church. Even within a denomination, if urban parish

boundaries are ignored, each congregation can become a closed religious interest group. The members need not even know one another except as devotees of a weekly exercise of piety. World and Church, secular life and Gospel, love of neighbour and love of God can remain in separate compartments. Evangelism, consequently, is in continual danger of being reduced to rivalry in recruiting members from among those who have already qualified as desirable additions to a particular congregation. We encounter here another travesty of true evangelism and a bitter fruit of the disunity among Christians. So serious is this loss of identity between life in the church and life in community that it may call for radical re-thinking of what should constitute a Christian congregation. The social unit for creating Christian community life may be the community of office or factory, in which the word neighbour still has real meaning, and in which the command to love our neighbour is inescapable.

Indeed, if the Church has little more to offer modern man than a specialised cultural interest, divorced from life in the world — even when this claims to deal with the Ruler of heaven and earth — the average man's allegiance will be won by rival fellowships, not thus divorced. Rival fellowships, as already noted, actually confront us in our time — the labour union, the Communist cell, the professional society for doctors or lawyers or university professors, the country club of suburbia, the community in poverty of an urban proletariat. These may turn out to be, for our day, the "principalities and powers" which the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit is called upon to convert to Christ. Will anything short of a revived power-endowed Church be equal to this task?

THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION

Even when a church emerges from its isolation and introversion, it confronts in our day a literally gigantic problem of communication. The great Christian words are unfamiliar to large sections of mass society. The "language of Canaan" is alien to the modern world. The problem of communication is as urgent today in the lands of the older churches as it has always been realised to be in what were once foreign mission fields. The younger churches may, therefore, be a guide to the older churches as the latter undertake this for them unaccustomed labour.

THE NEED FOR THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

In the task of engagement with one section of contemporary society — the so-called intellectuals — the greatest need may consist not merely in solving the problem of communication, but in theological renewal itself, above all the nurture of lay theologians. The disrepute which the very word theology has suffered in recent generations has had tragic results. The lay man has long lived under the illusion that theology was, like evangelism, a specialty for the professional few. In large areas of modern church life, Christianity is thought by the layman to consist in little more than a heightened version of the Golden Rule, a gospel of salvation by works alone. The Christ of apostolic faith, ascended Lord and Saviour, has

been transformed into a mere hero of humanity, a First Christian, whose perfection unredeemed human nature is asked to imitate.

Such a reduction of Christian faith to moral utopianism is powerless to evangelise the educated secularists of our post-war era. The secular idealist will ignore this gospel as a mere sentimental version of his own faith in man. The secular realist, in his turn, will likewise dismiss Christianity as irrelevant, and even a nuisance, in a world ruled by brute power. To engage the intelligentsia of our time evangelism will have to employ an intellectually honest theology — a theology which humbly confesses its past sins of blindness to truths discovered by science or realistic secular thought, yet which boldly confronts false secular dogmas with those of biblical faith. To be a Christian believer should be synonymous with being a lay biblical theologian. The Gospel in Christian witness must again become something more than the paraphrase of John 3, 16 as: "God so loved the world that He once inspired a certain Jew to inform his contemporaries that there is a great deal to be said for loving one's neighbour".

Are the churches, through preaching and education, prepared to face this problem of religious illiteracy? Winning to Christianity the alienated intelligentsia of the twentieth century may depend upon success in shouldering this burden.

II.

SIGNS OF RENEWAL AND HOPE

A call has come to the churches, as they envisage their evangelising vocation, to submit to judgment, penitence and renewal. Signs are increasing, however, that renewal is already on its way. These signs give cause for courage and hope. A Coming of the Lord — not yet in final Judgment, but in a new outpouring of the Spirit — may be vouchsafed the Church in our time. Only a few of these tokens of grace and power can find mention here. The reports which we are asking the churches to send will doubtless include others.

THE THEOLOGICAL REVIVAL

These are unquestionably days of theological revival. The Queen of the sciences is once more on her throne — in the classrooms of the Church's doctors first of all, but also in the thought-world of many of the Church's laity. A Christianity without theology is beginning to be seen as no Christianity at all. As "theology" — biblical theology above all — the Church's evangelism can again enter the lists against the secularist heresies of our age with weapons equal to the encounter. The "intellectuals" of Western culture undoubtedly constitute today a field ripe for the harvest. In this evangelising task the disunities of the Church begin to fade into the background, even Rome, especially her lay warriors for the faith, lending a helpful hand. Unity becomes a necessity in a war between essential Christian faith and undisguised apostasy and heresy.

THE APOSTOLATE OF THE LAITY

Parallel with, or participating in the theological revival of our time is the emergence of a revolution in the doctrine of the Church as held at least in recent generations. Its novelty is proved by the fact that even its most informed advocates grope for the proper term to describe it. Its key concept is symbolised by the word "Apostolate". Emerging in much ecumenical discussion of evangelism are the phrases: "The Apostolate of the Church", "The Apostolate of the Laity".

Underlying this view of the Church is the conviction that the Church is "Church" only when, as evangelistic community, or in the activity of every member, it participates in the apostolic ministry of being "sent" on a mission. The Church is the bearer of the Gospel to the world. Introversion, self-cultivation, cultural isolation are denials of the Church's very reason for existence under God.

Concretely this means ceasing once for all to define evangelism as a vocation limited to the clergy. The Church must re-discover the original meaning of the word laity — that "laity", in the New Testament, signifies the "people" of God as a corporate whole. Clergy and laity *together* are the missionary people of God, a "royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellence of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light" (I Peter 2, 9). The functions of the minister and those of the layman differ within the household of faith, but neither is exempt from the call to spread the Gospel. It would not, indeed, be unfair to the New Testament picture of the Church to say that witnessing to those outside the Church's life is the peculiar "work" of the laity, since they are, in very truth, the Church *in the world*.

THE EVANGELISING COMMUNITY

Missionary literature is familiar with the "mission compound". This is often criticised today because it easily degenerates into a walled community — the introverted church in a new setting. Yet this does not disprove the value of planting a cell of the Kingdom, in social form, in an area which needs the Gospel — as the story of the best examples of early monasticism as a missionary agent could validate. With the vanishing of the distinction between homeland and foreign fields as missionary opportunities, every congregation, at home or abroad, could become a mission compound. Pioneers, however, are needed, and have appeared. Some of the more spectacular experiments in France of Roman Catholic communities of workman-priests have received much notice of late. Less known, perhaps, are equally significant instances of community evangelism on Protestant soil — an interdenominational missionary parish planted in the midst of a New York slum — or an "open rectory", with a ministerial group in residence, in a depressed area of Jersey City, to cite only two American examples. News reports of other such pioneering ventures deserve publicity. "Effective evangelism", so reads the testimony of a participant in the life of one of these mission compounds, "is the process of living in a Christian community. It is the Christian community which makes the evangelistic impact upon the individuals and the community surrounding it".

HIGHWAY ROBBERY EVANGELISM

Under this startling title mention could be made of various new and daring evangelistic ventures. The phrase describes, specifically, experiments, notably in France, of penetrating communities (totally isolated from the Church) by secular drama and cinema — thus stealing, as it were, from secular godlessness its own weapons of propaganda and using them for Christ. A theatre or hall is rented, invitations are issued for free attendance, and the film or drama is presented. This is followed by open discussion of its deeper issues, especially those bearing upon religion. The movement is spreading under the title *Film et Vie*, its bold purpose that of “patient and slow mental re-education and evangelisation of the de-christianised masses”.

The cited example touches, it should be noted, on only one instance of exploring the evangelistic potentialities of the technological instruments of our age. We are expecting to receive reports also on radio and television evangelism, and on other pioneer experiments in mass communication.

THE HALF-WAY CHURCH

Space permits only one further allusion to ways in which pioneers are re-thinking the Church's evangelistic strategy. Few words occur more frequently in the more imaginative explorations of the Church's evangelistic task, particularly in European discourse, than the little prefix *para*. We meet hyphenated phrases such as *para-parish*, *para-ministry*, *para-liturgy*. *Para* means “alongside of” or “parallel to” or “half-way”. Illustrations readily occur of such half-way groups or *para-evangelistic* activities. A cell group of enquirers meeting in a home, not yet committed Christians, but open for religious discussion, is an easily identified half-way parish. Other instances could be gatherings of doctors or lawyers, consisting of both Christians and non-Christians, which meet to explore the ethical demands of their respective professions. Increasing need is felt for institutions or groups which offer opportunities for Christian and non-Christian, churchman and non-churchman, to expose before one another, in an environment of freedom and mutual respect, their doubts and convictions. Before the Church can expect the outsider to surrender to the authority of Revelation it must respect the sincerity of his questions and honest doubts. Even for the newly converted or nearly converted, *para-parochial* group life may prove to be a desirable mediating experience, preparatory to full participation in the Church's historic liturgies, preparatory also for the possible shock of disillusionment which incorporation into a worldly parochialism may involve. There are those, as indicated earlier, who advocate that the Church should re-think its parochial structure as a whole, so as to provide more flexibly for the nurture of vocational groupings or class-communities — occupational neighbourliness having so largely replaced the geographical parish or congregation.

In discovering anew its high vocation as God's agent of redemption, the Christian ecumenical community is called upon to listen in our time, as it may not have listened for generations, to “what the Spirit saith to the churches”.

HOW YOU CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE ASSEMBLY PREPARATIONS FOR THIS SUBJECT

To be fruitful the discussions of this subject at the Assembly must be well prepared. Information, reports of existing situation, new insights are urgently needed and solicited and the participation of Christians all over the world is therefore cordially welcomed.

The technical preparations are being assigned to a preparatory Commission, which will have the task of producing a factual survey concerning the thought and work of the churches in this particular field. The Commission must also submit a preliminary draft report for the use of the appropriate Assembly section. This material is intended to provide the necessary background information and documentation for the delegates to the Assembly.

Here are some suggestions how you can help in the work of this Commission:

- a. Christian groups and organisations can incorporate this subject into their programme and submit their findings to the Commission.
- b. It is urged that *ad hoc* groups be set up to produce material for the preparatory commissions on some of the specific questions mentioned in the text of this leaflet.
- c. Church presbyteries, synods, conferences and other official bodies are requested to place these subjects on their agendas for comment.
- d. Religious papers and journals can help by securing experts from their country or other countries to write articles on this subject. Copies of such articles should be submitted for the use of the Commission.

For further information about the preparations and how you can participate, write to your national ecumenical office, or to —

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THE ASSEMBLY SUBJECTS

THE MAIN THEME:

The Christian Hope — (final formulation to be decided by the Central Committee in January, 1953).

SUBSIDIARY THEMES:

1. Faith and Order — Our Oneness in Christ and our Disunity as Churches.
2. Evangelism — The Mission of the Church to Those outside her Life.
3. Social Questions — The Responsible Society in a World Perspective.
4. International Affairs — Christians in the Struggle for World Community.
5. Inter-group Relations — The Church amid Racial and Ethnic Tensions.
6. The Laity — The Christian in his Vocation.

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Documents on all the Assembly subjects may be secured from the World Council of Churches at the following addresses:

Geneva: Study Department, 17 route de Malagnou

London: 39, Doughty Street, W.C. 1

New York: 156 Fifth Avenue