The Church and Social Christianity as an agent of ecumenical activity: the British Methodist contribution to the nascent Life and Work movement and precursor of the World Council of Churches

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to a great pioneer of ecumenical studies in the context of his expertise in systematic theology and in liturgy. I mean, of course, Geoffrey Wainwright, who contributed to so many of these Oxford Institutes up to the last and was a giant in the over 50 years of Methodist – Catholic and other international dialogues. 35 years ago now, he published a chapter in his book *The Ecumenical Moment* [Eerdmans, 1983] entitled *Revolution and Quietism.* It has been one of the inspirations for this paper, presented now in the section of the Institute he once co-chaired, at a conference now looking at aspects of revolution and reform from many aspects within Methodism. He seeks within his essay to find a via media in terms of the engagement of religion and society, of the Church and the World, for quiet revolution and revolutionary quiet, in which to seek forgiveness and reconciliation grounded in a universal ethic of love, freely and indiscriminately given. It is in this most catholic spirit of our Founding Father`s praxis and teaching that I seek to offer as a reflection a fresh reading of the ecumenical movement in which he was so immersed. I want to argue that the quiet revolution in ecumenism will work (and can be seen to have worked throughout) in peaceful social action for change and the common good.

35 years ago he concluded his essay with these prophetic words which are an inspiration for all of those who are engaged in ecumenical work today:

> It is only through ecumenical solidarity with the hungry, the oppressed peoples of the developing countries, that the privileged Christians of Europe today can make a testimony of non-violent love which will carry any conviction [Lochmann, quoted in Wainwright, 1983:168]

In an age of Brexit, of the rise of neo-fascism and ultra-nationalism on the continent of Europe, and the trade and other barriers erected by the present Presidency of the United States, such words must ring even truer and with an increased urgency call the Church to offer models of reconciliation to the world arising out of its own quest for unity.

Introduction

As I started writing this paper on 21st June 2018, the news showed the historic visit of Pope Francis to the Headquarters of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva, commemorating the 70th anniversary of its foundation in Amsterdam in 1948. The WCC webpage headed its publicity for the Papal visit under the slogan “Walking, praying and working together”. As Pope Francis said in his address to those gathered in the ecumenical chapel at the heart of the WCC: “we can pray, evangelise and serve together”. Note the deliberate emphasis on two aspects of what we can describe as spiritual ecumenism and the ecumenism of social

action which have been the hallmarks of more recent Catholic emphases in the work of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, away from the longer established and often primary role of what we can categorize as Faith and Order issues, focussed on the bilateral and multi-lateral international dialogues in which Methodists and Catholics have played a major part or over 50 years to date.

Traditionally many have traced the origins of the Ecumenical Movement back to the establishment of the World Christian Student Federation and the World Missionary Conference in 1910, with the outstanding contribution of American Methodist, John R Mott, as a prime mover and shaker over several decades of the early 20th century [Cracknell, 2005: 243ff, Goodall, 1961: 9 and Turner in Davies, 1983: Chapter IX]. He it was who lay behind the organization of the Edinburgh conference and later Faith and Order initiatives, though conspicuously absent from the Stockholm conference in the Life and Work Movement but coming into the planning for the Oxford conference in the hopes of bringing the two strands of faith and order, life and work, together in a larger organization. Pride of place has traditionally been given to Mott and other American contributions, though with some recognizing the later contributions of British scholars Newton Flew and Geoffrey Wainwright (both associated with the earlier days of the Oxford Institute). The roles of Hugh Price Hughes, Samuel Keeble , John Scott Lidgett and other British Methodists of the "social Christianity" strand of Wesleyanism have been underplayed, though more recognized by Christopher Evans in his recent explorations in the Anglo-American transatlantic links within the respective churches in his *The Social Gospel in American Religion: a History [Evans, 2017]* to which I will refer.

This paper will seek to demonstrate the importance of the emphasis on social Christianity within Methodist churches in the latter part of the nineteenth and earlier part of the twentieth centuries in cementing not only intra-ecumenical links within the world Methodist family but also within the Free Church movement with which Methodism allied itself and with Anglicans and other Protestants besides, in the growing rapprochement between denominations in the so-called Ecumenical Century. This has often been traced back to the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 as the starting point. I want to suggest that we need to look further back than this.

I believe that a stronger force behind the coming together of churches, particularly on both sides of the Atlantic, was the emphasis in London and Oxford, in Washington, New York and Chicago, of what became characterized as the "social gospel" effect in bringing Christians together on a range of issues on which they could agree. This was long ago recognized by Nils Knelstrom, in his chapter on *Movements for International Friendship and Life and Work, 1910 – 1925*, in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517 – 1948*, [Rouse and Neil, 1954: Chapter 11] who pointed to the way in which Christian social action in the 19th century had broken through denominational and national barriers, as exemplified in the settlement movement and the establishment of diaconal works, underpinned by the work and writing of F D Maurice and Charles Kingsley and other so-called Christian socialists. It is the Methodist contribution to this, in the spirit of Wesleyan "social holiness" or social engagement that I want to explore.

As was recognized by one of the leading lights of what was to be the WCC, W A Visser t'Hooft, in a chapter of *The Church as an Oecumenical Society*, the churches connected to the Life and Work movement had by 1937 come to hold "common convictions about the nature of church", when they "speak and act together" and work co-operatively outside existing church structures, through study, research and discussion, as well as being a prophetic voice for justice and peace in the world. [Oldham, 1937, p.99] While the Oxford Life and Work Conference of that year was not a substitute for a United Church, it was a signpost. And it acted as midwife for the birth of the WCC in 1948, whose 70th we celebrate this year.

Many of the results of what I would call the proto-ecumenism of social action are to be found not in churches but in a panoply of non-denominational organizations, such as the YMCA and YWCA, the Evangelical Alliance, the Student Christian Movement, the Sunday School movement and para-group such as the Christian Endeavour movement and the Brotherhood, each offering what Marcus Ward called a "nursery of ecumenical leadership". [Ward, 1968: 8-9]. And many of these contributed to a growing understanding, particularly among evangelical and free churches but embracing also Anglican, Lutheran and other mainstream churches, where there was as much concern for the social and economic questions of the day, as with moral imperatives. The Stockholm Conference of 1925 was to conclude that "there is ground for hope. The spirit of service and co-operation are very much abroad in industry", as well as in education and evangelism, in business, labour and politics. This was a contributory factor in the growth of Social Democracy as an alternative to Fascism and Totalitarianism in Europe. [Bell, ed, 1925]

For some ecumenical commentators, the Life and Work movement has been a lesser and debased form of ecumenism, a type of pragmatic co-operation centred on the social concern commonly felt. This has led some continental European theologians to dub the movement as "the Anglo-Saxon heresy", a pseudo-Pelagian version of what others regard as the true quest for ecumenism centred of worship and doctrine rather than on social action. [Ward, 1968: 28]

To what extent can this common action in social action be demonstrated in the developments within the churches prior to the Stockholm Conference and the birth of the Life and Work movement? And to what extent was the Methodist influence, British and American, a key factor in triggering the discussions which led to the creation of church agencies and inter-denominational bodies which fed the vital work of those committed to the ecumenical task of bringing churches together, not just for mission and unity, but also for service in and to the world? And is this a distortion of the true quest for Christian Unity, whatever that might be?

I would like to trace historically the early strivings of Methodist churches in the quest for unity and their involvement in ecumenism through social action, from the 1880s to the birth of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948.

Historical developments: Methodist ecumenism from the 1880s onwards

The late 19th century saw the development of what became the World Methodist Council, as a number of churches deriving their origins from Wesleyan and Methodist roots came together to own their commonality in terms of what became a world communion of churches of the Methodist family. It started in 1881 with the calling of the first World Methodist Ecumenical Conference in London, England. Subsequently meeting every ten years to 1931 and then every five years after resuming its meetings following the Second World War, their programmes and membership mirrors the development of the ecumenical movement more widely as churches came together and responded to the challenges of social questions of the day.

The earlier period was clearly more interested in intra-Methodist ecumenism, with calls for a greater urgency to talks to restore unity within the Methodist families, raised in both 1881 and 1891. In London in 1901 there was more emphasis, at the time of the greatest impact of the so-called Nonconformist Conscience and the influence of Protestant church members serving in politics, national and local, upon the Free Church movement as a way in which to have the greatest impact in society. From 1891 (Washington) to Toronto (1911) there was a greater space in proceedings given over to social questions, with some emphasis on matters of moral purity (sabbatarianism, drinking and gambling issues prevailed) rather than labour conditions and the socio-economic well-being of nations. But as the twentieth century dawned there was a rising concern about international peace and about the challenge of poverty as a consequence of the worst excesses of industrialisation. Drawing on the growing examples of work done in the cities, of London, New York and Chicago in particular, the good practice of those churches engaged in radical social work was shared.

From the beginnings of the Methodist ecumenical conferences, there was always a wider ecumenical emphasis, of seeking that unity with others to which Christians were called, as Rev. Benjamin Gregory, a great British Methodist ecumenical enthusiast, remarked in his paper on *Methodism as a bond of Brotherhood*:

> There can never be a bond of brotherhood (sic) amongst nations which is not a bond of brotherhood among neighbours … closeness of relationship, of reciprocal obligation, of affection and endearments. [Proceedings of the Oecumenical Conference , London, 1881: 594]

From the 1890s, serious consideration was given to Methodist reunions, despite the rebuff given to Anglicans after the Lambeth Conference of 1888. Sir Henry Lunn, the British layman, through his *Review of the Churches* and his Grindelwald (Switzerland) conferences, ground-breaking meetings in the 1890s, sought to keep alive the prospect of reunion with the Church of England, with the support of Percy Bunting and Hugh Price Hughes (see below). The conference worked on the growing conviction that "social problems called for the best energies of the united forces of all the churches", citing the examples of Andrew Mearns and General William

Booth in their responses to the challenges of "Outcast London", and the creation of the National Free Church Council to co-ordinate the work of the churches [Bell, 1925:326].

But, in terms of more organic union, even the talks between the British Methodist Churches (Wesleyan, Primitive and others) failed to make any headway, though the success of schemes in Canada (a union of 1884) and Australia (four churches united in 1881) gave some hope and impetus which resulted in the creation of the United Methodist Church in Britain in 1907 [Rouse and Neill, 300ff]. It was however another twenty five years before the Union of Methodist Churches took place in Britain.

More concern was given to relationships with other Protestant churches with whom increasingly Methodists worked in a whole manner of responses to the challenge of mission, particularly in the cities, as well as co-operation in foreign missions and the work of the British and Foreign Bible Society. At the 1891 conference in Washington, Rev. Peter Thompson, Wesleyan Methodist minister and founder of the East End Mission in London, spoke powerfully of a serving Church connecting with the social problems of its day in collaboration with other churches in order "to establish the Kingdom of God on earth". [Proceedings, 1891:462]. Such appeals were in the wider context of an appeal for Methodist reunion made by Rev T G Selby in his paper on *The Christian Church: its essential Unity and genuine Catholicity.* A united Methodism was needed to cement its doctrinal unity in the creation of a common Methodism for the mission field". It was to be found in a unity in home mission, through social service together, as well as in overseas missions. [Proceedings, 1891:115]

From 1901, recognizing the creation of many Free Church organizations in the 1890s, those at the World Methodist Conference in London examined the *Relationship of Methodism to the Evangelical Free Church Movement.* Frank Mason North spoke about the American experience and W J Townsend from the British Wesleyan Methodist perspective. Townsend reflected that Methodism had never identified itself with any political party in the State and so was able to "exert a high and beneficial influence on great social reforms". "The Free Church community must become the conscience of the nation", through the work of the central missions and settlements with an "aggressive evangelism for the lost masses, both poor and rich". [Proceedings, 1901:114-15] He issued a rallying call to all churches, to "denounce the terrible contrasts of wealth and poverty, the cruelty of selfish luxury and wasteful extravagance. It must have a bleeding heart for the poor, for the crowded degraded masses of humanity stewing in squalid wretchedness and dying like dogs". It was no surprise, given such contemporary sentiments, that the hymn of Frank Mason North (1850-1935), written in 1903 and inspired by his work in the slums of New York, "Where cross the crowded ways of life", found its way into Methodist hymnals on both sides of the Atlantic. Percy Bunting at the same conference urged that the social work of the Church should be un-denominational as "they are more important than the things we hold in common". The appeal of a "plain, large, Evangelical Christianity" united in its mission would be irresistible. F M North centred his presentation on ecumenism

being the “basis for common service” rather than of a common ecclesiastical order or common statements of theology. [Proceedings, 1901:128ff]

The proceedings of the Toronto Conference of 1911 likewise put social reform at the heart of the ecumenical enterprise, whether of Methodists together or with Free Church colleagues and other like-minded Christians. The desire for international peace and the need to combat socialism were issues for debate upon which there was a range of opinion but the centrality of the need for social reform as the Church`s duty and essential for releasing “moral and religious possibilities” were points raised by British Methodists, including Arthur Henderson, a leading Labour MP, and Sir George Smith, a prominent layman. [Proceedings, 1911: 29, 384-85]

The progressivist optimism implicit in the World Conference proceedings of the pre-War years was of course rudely shattered by the outbreak of the First World War. But, as we shall see, the momentum built up by social action projects mirroring ecumenical aspirations were not diminished and remained in place as the Life and Work movement came to birth after the end of the War.

British religious history in late 19th early 20th cents.

Methodism had always had and a concern for social justice with its emphasis on social holiness. But it received a new emphasis in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Possibly this was in reaction to the greater emphasis on moral regeneration which came out of the holiness tradition. The tensions between the moral and social motivations for regeneration remained within the Methodist movement throughout the twentieth century. By 1909 a new view of Methodism`s destiny emerged, exemplified in the *New History of Methodism*, edited by W J Townsend and others:

> Wesley anticipated almost all the forms of social work now carried on … if he was not a theoretical socialist, he was a self-denying, practical philanthropist, who gave a new and abiding impulse to social reform. [quoted Gibson, 2013: 479]

Such a re-reading was to create the milieu for the casting of Wesley as a great Social Reformer. As I have argued elsewhere [Macquiban, 2013], he was also a proto-ecumenist. I would continue to argue that the two, ecumenism and social action, cannot be separated. His Arminian theology and praxis, of indiscriminate love from God`s grace, made an ecumenical catholic spirit implicit at the heart of the Methodist movement. This leitmotif worked through the Methodist historiography of the twentieth century as R F Wearmouth in the 1930s and E C Unwin in his John Wesley: Christian Citizen - *Selections from his social teaching* [Epworth, 1937] made much of his social work and the example of the Tolpuddle Martyrs and Trade Unionists and social activists among the later Methodists. Latest in the line of such writers have been Ted Jennings and Manfred Marquardt, both distinguished past lecturers at the Oxford Institute, who contributed to the conference on *Good News for the Poor* in 1992. Marquardt was to go so far as to claim that “John Wesley was the greatest social reformer of his time”, [Gibson, 2013: 481], a view under current revision.

The Oxford lectures of Professor T H Green were clearly a formative influence upon Hugh Price Hughes, himself a minister here in Oxford at Wesley Memorial Church in the 1880s before his pioneering ministry in London. His biographer says of him that he sought "to bring back the alienated masses to the social brotherhood of Christ" [Oldstone-Moore , 114]. His manifesto for a radical realignment in society was set out in his book *Social Christianity*.

> We Christians, when we unite our forces, are simply irrestistible. Let us .. combine heartily to abolish Slavery, Drunkenness, Lust, Gambling. Ignorance, Pauperism, Mammonism and War. [Quoted by J M Turner in Davies, 1983: 311]

His Forward Movement was the last flowering of the Nonconformist Conscience which reached its peak in the 1906 Liberal Government landslide and the advent of a reformist government in which many who served represented overtly Christian principles. But thereafter there was steady decline in the Christian influence in Parliament, sadly because it failed to speak with the one voice that social action was leading it to seek in Christian Unity. Methodism`s stress on teetotalism and temperance often set it apart from the working classes who increasingly voted Labour which, though it "owed more to Methodism than Marx", did not wholly espouse the more pietistic elements which persisted in the movement.

Methodism`s ecumenical instincts were thus diverted into the efforts to achieve internal unity at the expense of a wider ecumenical presence. Methodist leaders like A S Peake (PM layman and scholar) and John Scott Lidgett (WM President and politician) consistently argued for corporate reunion of not only Methodists but the whole of Christendom, so that the world might believe. The Methodist Recorder at the beginning of a new year where hopes were high for peace and reconciliation wrote :

> Christian Unity is the definite charge from God as the League of Nations is the definite charge for the nations." [2 January 1919]

The catholicity of such men as Hugh Price Hughes (HPH) and Scott Lidgett was channelled through their involvement of religion in politics and in social action where they harnessed the forces of the Christian commitment to seeking the common good. Their friend and ally J H Shakespeare (Congregationalist) declared that "denominationalism is a decaying idea – it certainly does not commend itself to a nation in a socialistic age". His solution was to form a broadly United Free Church of England as soon as possible to reform the nation. But it sadly proved impossible to merge the two Free Church Councils let alone form a new Church! [Davies, 1983: 333ff]

The broad brushstrokes of the writings and actions of HPH whose desire was to found a new Methodism at the heart of a conscience of a new nonconformity (Oldstone-Moore, 1999: quoted in Gibson 2013:495ff] was sadly cut short by his early death in 1902, but Methodist Elishas, in the form of **Samuel Keeble** (1853 – 1946) and **John Scott Lidgett** (1854-1953), were on hand to take up his mantle.

John Turner in his *New DNB article* describes **Samuel Keeble** as "one of the leaders of the Forward Movement and a pioneer of democratic socialism. Taught by a former Chartist leader, was a key proponent of the social Christianity espoused by his mentor HPH for whom he had written in the Methodist Times, a paper of socialist leanings, under the column *Labour Lore*, before setting up his own *Methodist Weekly* which ran from 1900-1903. As well as his prolific writings focussing on his primary concerns for good labour relations and fair working conditions (*Industrial Day Dreams* 1906, *The Idea of the Material Life* 1908, and *Christian Responsibility for the Social Order* 1922), the important contribution he made was to bringing about agencies to inform the churches and activate them in the area of social concern.

Taking up the work of the Anglican Christian Social Union and other para-church organizations, he founded in 1905 the **Wesleyan Union for Social Service** WMUSS (acting as its Chair with W F Lofthouse as Secretary) and contributed greatly to its influential conferences and publications in the period up to 1914 (See and Serve was its magazine from 1906 to 1917). The Sigma Club was a group of socialist minded ministers, many of whom held office within the Wesleyan Methodist Church. It was through these that the Temperance and Social Welfare Department of the Church was set up in 1918 with Henry Carter as a Secretary. His biographer, Michael Edwards, calls Keeble "the rejected prophet", indicating the way in which his political agenda was not always acceptable to the majority of the Methodist constituency. He never became President of a Methodist Church before or after Union.

John Scott Lidgett was a towering figure in Methodism who achieved high office twice, including the Presidency in the year of Union for which he had long fought. He founded the Bermondsey Settlement in 1891 despite Conference`s suspicion of social work without clear evangelistic goals. He remained as Leader until 1949. From the 1890s he took an active role in local politics, serving in key roles in education and welfare in London and on the Senate of London University. He was in succession to HPH editor of the Methodist Times from 1907 to 1918. He took part in a number of ecumenical ventures and conversations, ranging from the Grindelwald meetings organized by his friend Henry Lunn, to serving on various Free Church committees and councils. He was Moderator of the Federal Council of Evangelical Free Churches from 1923-1925. [see New DNB article by Martin Wellings]

The WMUSS formed in 1905 was a turning point in the recognition that social questions were crucial for the mission and unity of the Church. Keeble and Lidgett were central figures in the British Methodist contribution towards strengthening the Free Church influence in the national life and in forming closer links with other Christian churches. Along with younger scholars W F Lofthouse (1871-1965) and Maldwyn Hughes (1875-1940) and Ernest Rattenbury (1870-1963) they wrote and taught in the series of publications and conferences which produced an impressive array of material for the education of Methodists before and after the War. *Social Tracts for the Times* and T*he ABC Annotated Bibliography on Social Questions* appeared in 1907. *Social Science and Service* was the published papers of a WMUSS conference held here in Oxford at Easter 1909. The preface claimed that they were "in the truly apostolic succession of

those Oxford men (sic) who visited the sick and those in prison, and who preached the gospel to the poor". Lidgett reminded them that : "In no place could we so fitly meet together for this great object as in the Wesley Memorial Church Oxford … inspired by the memory of the 'Godly Club' with fearless and devoted pursuit of its practical beneficence". While not wishing to equate the Kingdom of God with Social Reform, he challenged them to be a Church "full of those who hold faith in common for united service in the world". (p11)

Keeble set the tone for the remaining papers in reminding participants of the need to follow "Our Lord`s Golden Rule. .. the Law of reciprocity, equality, fairness and justice". (p195) "Ethics and Economics", he declared, "are for ever joined together by God. Let no man put them asunder". (p188) The socialism of the Sermon on the Mount was to be applied to Home, School and Church. Various speakers spelt out the ways in which this might be worked out in the church and in the world.

The Social Outlook appeared the following year 1910 as a result of another conference in Oxford. Keeble`s paper on *The Future of Social Service* was indicative of his collectivist and socialistic approach which saw ecumenical co-operation as vital if the churches were to create what he called an "army of benevolent and social workers": he wrote, "An amateur social reformer may be made a skilled social servant" through education and training. His vision of a network of voluntary groups working together inter-denominationally for the common good was to work in the spirit of Matthew 25, a "message of health to men's bodies as well as souls". He advocated more Unions for Social Service at every level. He saw the WMUSS as not merely educating the church for social service but acting to awaken the conscience of Methodists, especially regarding housing, unemployment, conditions of labour, propaganda work in literature and journalism.

Significantly he drew on parallels from across the Atlantic (the **Methodist Federation for Social Service**) in its preparations for the General Conference of 1912, building on the work of the 1908 adoption of the *Social Creed of Methodism.* There the so-called social gospel movement had become embedded in mainstream Protestant Christianity, particularly through the work and writing of Baptist Water Rauschenbusch, of the Rochester Theological Seminary NY, the most influential proponent of the social gospel and author of *the Social Crisis* in 1907, and Washington Gladden who wrote that "The Kingdom of God is a concept that embodies Jesus` social teaching for the modern age". [Evans, 2017:77]

But it was British-born **Harry Ward** who introduced American Methodism to the ideals of the movement and made them concrete within the structures of the Church. Born in 1873, he imbibed from Wesleyan Methodism in England the work and witness of HPH and Samuel Keeble, arguing for a re-interpretation of Christianity rooted in evangelical pietism that engaged the problems associated with industrialisation in towns and cities. A product of North Western University Chicago and Harvard University, he went on to found a settlement house at NWU until sacked in 1900 for his outspoken radicalism. "I believe in a God of justice who has called to himself the God of the poor.." He went from there to found the Open and Industrial Church

League and engage in an urban ministry in Chicago. Evans judges that he was “an important precursor to the modern ecumenical movement”, as he enabled a variety of Protestant church leaders to explore ways of working together in applied Christianity. These included leaders within his own Methodist Church who, with Frank Mason North, who headed up New York City`s League of Church Extensions, became interested in their advocacy of social reform.

In December 1907, Ward, North and others travelled to Washington DC where they founded they first modern caucus group as the Methodist Federation for Social Service within the MEC: “to stimulate a wide study of social questions by the Church side by side with practical social service.” Like the WMUSS it emulated, it was to be broadly ecumenical and with a focus on education and action through service. Several church leaders who went on to serve in the ecumenical instruments created after the war, notably Worth Tippy, a prominent Cleveland minister, and Herbert Welch, the President of Ohio Wesleyan University, were involved from the start. The measure of its impact is noted in the reception given by President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House for the group, affirming favourably a statement of social principles endorsed by the group.

The MFSS acted as a model for other American Protestant denominations to follow, offering a **Social Creed** that was widely modified and adapted, first by the MEC and then by others before 1916. This pan-evangelical ecumenism was cemented by their common cause, through the Federal Council of Churches of Christ formed in 1908, comprising 33 Protestant denominations acting in tandem with common objectives. “One of the many supporters of this developing model of ecumenical co-operation was Harry Ward who viewed this body as an ideal platform from which to “engage the moral conscience of the nation”. The current work of the Church and Life department of the UMC carries on this tradition. It was, as Evans judges, “a milestone in the development of the modern ecumenical movement”, raising the level at which Protestant church leaders could engage with society in the worlds of academia, business and industry. [Evans, 2017:107]

The period before 1918 in the UK required inter-denominational co-operation, especially facilitated and required by the First World War trenches and field of war, and the desire to work together for common good, whether as combatants, those serving as forces chaplains or those who were conscientious objectors and served in the Ambulance corps. The common service which bound the nation bound also the churches in a renewed effort to seek a closer unity. Shakespeare`s *The Church at the Cross-Roads* was *t*he Free Church equivalent of the Lambeth Appeal of 1920 [Catterall, 2016: 24-27], building on the establishment of the Federal Council of Evangelical Free Churches in 1917.

Post-war developments

The impact of the War in an era of the League of Nations established to try to bring international peace and security to a world torn apart by four bloody years of conflict led to a renewed desire for organic unity among British Methodists, possibly as a response also to the

reality of institutional decline setting in. One could argue that it came thirty years too late and diverted British Methodists from playing a fuller part in the more international developments in which the Americans and continental Protestants took the main part. [Turner in Davies, 1983,: 333]. Certainly the Peace movement was a motive for ecumenism, trying to heal the divisions between the Christian Axis powers, Protestant and Catholic, and the other Allies, mostly also Protestant and Catholic. There was also anxiety about the impact of socialism and communism, and a desire for moral purity which stemmed from the older pietistic strains of evangelical Christianity. The more recent emphasis on social action found some resistance within the churches who coupled this with a suspicion of the ecumenical agenda behind much of this activity.

In Britain such activity was wrested from the Free Church exponents by a renewed Anglicanism under the charismatic leadership of William Temple, Bishop of Manchester and later to be Archbishop of Canterbury, the chief architect of an Anglican social theology which underpinned the development of the Welfare State in the modified democratic socialism which survived the inter war years. Building on the work of Christian socialists and the Industrial Christian Fellowship, whose work Hastings judges mostly unmemorable and ineffectual, and a Report on ***Christianity and Industrial Problems*** in 1918 (largely written by R H Tawney, whose socialist and egalitarian vision of society permeated much of the theological underpinning of politics in the 1920s), a conference was planned which met in Birmingham in 1924 with 1,400 delegates representing various Protestant churches.

COPEC worked within twelve commissions, each with representatives of the different denominations of British Christians, on a range of social issues. [Hastings, 1986:179]. The Commission on *The Social Functions of the Church* was premised on the belief that "common action is undoubtedly made easier by a common religious outlook", anticipating the Lund principle by several decades and urging the creation of local Christian Social Councils in all localities, encouraged by the Church`s own Social Service departments nationally. This ecumenism was the bedrock upon which the British Council of Churches emerged in the early 1940s. Alec Vidler (later to be Dean of King`s College Cambridge) commented that "seldom was a satisfactory balance struck between idealism and realism", a harsh criticism of a body of work which represented a genuine attempt of churches to engage with the nation in resolving pressing social and economic problems. It contributed powerfully to a growing sense of fellowship among the churches. It spawned a series of conferences and research projects which fed in to the programme for reform which had to wait till after the Second World War for fuller implementation. [Catterall, 2016:55] COPEC was, in retrospect a vigorous demonstration of the churches` enthusiastic concern for social order, mirroring the rise of the fortunes of the Labour Party as those of the Liberals sank.

Samuel Keeble attended COPEC on behalf of the Wesleyan Methodists and applauded its efforts. He made important contributions, as did Henry Carter, General Secretary for Temperance and Social Welfare, and Rev Thomas Nightingale, UMC minister and General

Secretary of the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches, who sat on the *Social Functions of the Church* commission. Rev Benson Perkins, the Assistant Secretary of the Social Welfare department, sat on the *Leisure* commission; Rev. Wilbert Howard, biblical tutor at Handsworth College, Birmingham, on *The Home* commission, and Rev W Russell Maltby, Warden of the Wesley Deaconess Order Institution on The *Nature of God* commission.

If British Methodists were able to take a limited role in COPEC, they were able to have only a token presence within the Life and Work movement, with more participation in its later Oxford meeting (1937) than in Stockholm (1925). The first conference was dominated by the figure of Nathan Soderblom, a towering Lutheran Swedish church man who "did more than any other Christian leader as teacher to unite Orthodox and Evangelical Churches of all nations and communities in a common fellowship , for the sake of Christ, and his truth and justice and peace" (George Bell). It was "to concentrate the mind of Christendom on the mind of Christ as revealed in the gospels towards those great social, industrial and international questions which are so acutely urgent in our civilisation". [Goodall, 1961: 60]

From the start he saw the Life and Work Movement as a stepping stone towards the creation of a World Council of Churches, uniting the various strands of ecumenical conversation, on faith and order and mission topics as well as on socio-economic issues related to the Social Order. But when it came to theological debates in Stockholm on the "setting up of the Kingdom of God on earth", differences became evident and developed, opening up different ways of handling the issues discussed, characterized by American/British activism over against German pietism/ otherworldliness, in part theological and in part geographical and other cultural differences [Fitzgerald, 2004:89 and Rouse and Neill, 1954: 546]. By 1937 the German participation was more limited as the continent slid towards another World War.

George Bell, later to be Bishop of Chichester, edited the official report of the Stockholm conference which met from 19th to 30th August 1925. In a note found in the volume held by the Centro Pro Unione`s ecumenical library in Rome, the following account of its genesis is given:

> When we met in Geneva for the first time after the last World War in 1920 to prepare for] the World Conference of Churches in Stockholm in 1925, the French delegates refused to enter into negotiations before the Germans confessed their sole guilt for the war and repented. The Conference was on the point of breaking off. Then the Moderator of the Waldensian Church, Signor Giampiccoli, stood up and said, "Dear Brethren, I lost two sons in the war and yet I feel nothing in my heart towards the brethren from the belligerent countries, other than peace and love. What we need are not human declarations, but the grace of God for the overcoming of our sins. Let us pray the Lord`s Prayer together." I don`t know whether the prayer "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" has ever been prayed in a deeper sense than at that time. We with common repentance and this common repentance saved the Oecumenical Movement which had hardly started. [In Adolf Keller, Christian Europe Today, 1942, p197]

This was at the gathering in Geneva in August 1920 with 90 members of 15 countries which after this dramatic intervention agreed to set up a "Universal Conference of the Churches of Christ on Life and Work". The committee established took five years planning to convene the conference.

At this Stockholm Conference, of the 500 gathered from 37 nations throughout the world (but mostly from Europe and the Americas), 20 were British and Irish Methodists, a small but significant presence. Its aim was "to unite the different churches in common practical work … to insist that the principles of the Gospel be applied to the solution of contemporary social and international problems". [Bell, 1925: 1]. Sir Henry Lunn, the British Methodist and member ex-officio of the Committee, gave an address setting out the context, drawing from his own Grindelwald conferences of the 1890s and the ecumenical social action in the Free Church sphere in Britain which, allied with Anglican enthusiasm, had given birth to COPEC. In contrast to Roman Catholicism (which by this stage had set its face against the earlier leanings towards social action) he proclaimed:

> What we need today is a real Catholicism, not in the despotism of a Pope, nor the tyranny of an ecclesiastical oligarchy, but a sense of the unity of the whole church of Christ which shall express itself in a moral teaching that shall have its due influence in the world. [Bell, 1925:329]

So from the start the Life and Work movement was founded upon the spiritual ecumenism which the horrors of the First World War had failed to dissipate, as exemplified by the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship which started in Uppsala in 1917, with a British counterpart established the following year, and the social action upon which many were committed in their search for unity.

From the same church came Rev. Henry Carter with his emphasis on the need for moral reform (temperance, gambling and sabbatarianism) and peace rather than a more pronounced emphasis on labour and justice issues which others stressed. Herein lay the weakness of the Methodist contribution with fine ideals and a pietistic streak diminishing a more robust presentation of the more democratic socialist aspirations of Keeble and the earlier generation of ecumenists. They found themselves out of step with the rank and file of Methodism and the annual conferences where there was an "ominous predictability of negative conference statements on drink and gambling" [Turner in Davies, 1983, Chapter IX]. Such concentration on moral issues diverted the Methodists from the bigger issues of peace and justice and broader ecumenism. The tide seems to turn in the mid-1930s with Carter`s commitment to pacifism (in the Fellowship of Reconciliation) and his hand in the production of the Conference report on a *Declaration concerning a Christian View of Industry in relation to the Social Order* (1934), stressing the need for local works councils reconciling and uniting capital and labour. [Catterall, 2016:57]

From American Methodism came Rev Worth Tippy, Secretary of the Commission on Church and Social Service of the Federal Council of Churches of USA, who made a powerful case for the christianization of business, to free industry from the curse of the acquisitive spirit, and inject a passion for the "more abundant life of humanity". His emphasis was to stress the need to address issues of living and high wages, reasonable working hours, safety at work, the abolition of child labour, with equal opportunities for women, together with better provision of housing and education for the workers. Industry, he said, must be a social trust and a co-operative enterprise with labour as "one great expression of Christian brotherhood". This came close to a non-revolutionary socialism and communism for which many strove in a welfare state built on justice and equal opportunities for all. In this enterprise Tippy appealed for the churches to be engaged through education and evangelism with "business, labour and politics". [Bell, 1925: 198ff]. Combined effort, working ecumenically, was the driver in the success of these efforts.

At the Oxford Conference of 1937, on *Church, Community and State*, the threads of COPEC and Stockholm came together to form the basis for further ecumenical developments, despite the darkening clouds of international tensions and potential war. Many of the practical suggestions incorporated into the agenda and discussions were built upon the work of research panels set up, and working ecumenically, after Stockholm, with regular meetings in the intervening years.

Representing British Methodism was Sir Josiah Stamp, later Lord Stamp of Shortlands, (a prominent Wesleyan layman and latterly Chairman of ICI and first presenter of the Beckly Lecture) and Rev E C Unwin, a Connexional Secretary, on the Economic Order commission, and Rev Dr Newton Flew of Cambridge on the Una Sancta and the World of Nations commission, bringing an important ecclesiological dimension (he was the chief architect of the report on The Nature of The Christian Church 1937) to the growing convergence of Faith and Order and Life and Work issues. He himself contributed in the immediate post-war period to an ecumenical symposium on the Christian *Witness in the Post-War World.* To those who argued that the Church should not have anything to do with economics or politics he countered: "how can the Church be unconcerned with all attempts to bring in a better social and international order?" centring the ecumenical impetus which brought the BCC and WCC to birth on the ‘’"social mission of the Church". [Craig, 1946: 46] Within a decade, with the fall of the great reforming Labour government, the churches too were moving away from this social agenda and back to one emphasising evangelism through the mass rallies of Billy Graham crusades to stress personal conversion rather than the transformation of the nation. Ecumenism stuttered on living with these tensions.

Conclusion

The young SCM pioneers of the pre 1914 period became the elder ecclesiastical statesmen of the 1930s at centre stage of Protestant Europe and the Americas. Oldham and Temple were in the business of trying to create new structures for a future in which Christianity in a bolder show of unity was to bring peace and justice to the divided world. "The captains of ecumenism were emboldened to press ahead more than otherwise might have been the case and to put

through a plan for a single unified international body which could represent the churches." [Hastings, 1986:302]. The Oxford Conference represented the most mature ecclesiastical approach to the social and economic problems of the interwar years. Despite the intervening war which broke out in 1939, the momentum towards the birth of both the BCC and WCC was not to be stopped. While Temple`s premature death brought his Presidency to a swift end, political developments after the war ensured that the Christian principles argued for ecumenically became embedded in the programme for the great reforming government of Attlee in 1945.

What the League of Nations was for the immediate aftermath of the First World War, the birth of the United Nations Assembly at Westminster Central Hall London in 1946 similarly expressed the earnest desire for a new world order and for international peace and security. The creation of parallel ecumenical instruments expressed these hopes in terms of church unity. The aspirations expressed in the Report of the Archbishops` Commission on Christianity and Industrial Problems in 1918, echoing the support given by the Free Church movement for greater ecumenical efforts, sums up the mood of the day:

> We say … that in the region of moral and social questions, we desire all Christians to begin at once to act together as if they were one body, in a visible fellowship … to bring together all Christians to act in this one department of life as one visible body would involve no loss and manifold gain. We should get to know and trust one another: we should learn to act together: we should thus prepare the way for fuller unity. [quoted in Rouse and Neill, 1954: 572]

This desire for a socio-moral ecumenicity just 100 years ago, built on the Anglo-American ecumenicity borne out of a reaction to the needs of the slums and cities of Britain and the USA in the late 19th century, gave birth to the COPEC and Stockholm conferences of the Life and Work movement, as a powerful agent of further widening ecumenical activity. But did the Life and Work movement degenerate into a series of seminars on social theology and comparative ecclesiology without an enduring impact of religion on society? As always, the movement was walking a tightrope between un-denominational pragmatism and doctrinaire confessionalism, revealing the tensions between the more conservative Faith and Order aspects of the ecumenical movement and its more radical exponents in Life and Work, with the Mission element holding the balance and often weighting it more in the direction of an emphasis on personal transformation rather than societal transformation.

There was a need, started in the Oxford conference of 1937, to reconcile Life and Work and Faith and Order issues in a proper treatment of the nature of the Church. This process started in the *Church, Community and State* conference which sowed the seeds for the birth of the British Council of Churches (1942) and the World Council of Churches (1948). Out of it emerged a more supra-national notion of church which cut across national boundaries and divides, to "cultivate an international fellowship on a Christian basis". But would the United Nations succeed where the League of Nations had failed? Would the WCC succeed where the separate

conferences of Faith and Order, of Life and Work, and of Mission, had failed through their limitations? [Rouse and Neil, 1954: 574 ff]. Those are questions which remain as a legacy to us as ecumenical practitioners 70 years later.

I end with the words of J H Oldham, in the spirit of Samuel Keeble and those other ecumenical pioneers of Social Christianity whom we honour and whose contribution to the ecumenical movement we increasingly value. Speaking at the Oxford Conference in 1937, he pleaded for a blending of theological reflection with reflection and action regarding everyday experiences and problems in society:

> The Christian witness in social and political life … must be through the action of a multitude of Christian men and women … actively engaged … in the conduct of administration, industry and the affairs of the public and common life. [quoted Rouse and Neill, 1954:592]

Those challenges are still ours today, with the wider ecumenical working together in issues of the environment and war and peace, of human trafficking and racism, of human rights and religious freedom, championed by Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew, by Archbishop Justin and Christian leaders represented in the member churches of the WCC and the Global Christian Forum, including our own World Methodist Council. This ecumenism of action does not replace the quest for fuller Christian Unity but it enables us to walk and work together "so that the world may believe".

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