What Future for Unity and Mission?

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Both these collections of essays are valuable reading for anyone wondering where the goal of full visible unity has gone to! After many years during which most churches and ecclesial communities had seemed agreed that the prayer of Jesus ‘that they may all be one’ implies full ecclesial and sacramental communion, and that this will require consensus on matters of faith and order, the situation now appears much more complex. Although bilateral and multilateral dialogues have often demonstrated substantial convergence, and the relationships between divided churches are vastly improved, this has not however resulted in unity between churches, except in a small number of cases where church-dividing dogmatic and other differences either do not exist or have ceased to matter.

Most churches, moreover, are coalitions: ecumenical enthusiasts have not always succeeded in communicating their vision adequately to their own communities, and especially to those for whom unity proposals seem to threaten the way in which they have learnt obedience to Christ. Apparently promising agreements then founder when faced with the practical realities of seeking synodal or magisterial approval.

A further factor is the multiplication of church communities worldwide, many of which have committed themselves to the ecumenical movement but do not give the same priority to agreement on matters of doctrine and church order. External pressures are also relevant: in many parts of the world
Christians face unprecedented threats from hostile forces which are no respecters of confessional differences, and everywhere there are situations of violence, natural disaster, poverty, injustice and disease which are beyond the capacity of divided churches to address.

These are just a few of the factors that seem to have refocused the ecumenical quest away from full ecclesial and sacramental communion on to peaceful coexistence and reconciled diversity, to collaboration and shared mission. At its most extreme, some no longer even speak of an ecumenical quest at all, at least in the sense of a search for a future unity judged to be elusive, but aspire rather to a practical making the most of the present possibilities for joint action. The present Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury have both encouraged this approach. These different emphases are nothing new, however. There have always been alternative visions, some seeking unity not so much in organic, structural or doctrinal terms but more in shared mission or social engagement (the visions of the mission agencies and the Life and Work movement respectively.)

Whether or not the present ecumenical crisis be a ‘winter’, as it is often described, it is certainly a challenge to reassess the goal of unity and ask again what these various visions of unity mean.

Both these expert collections of essays provide the enquirer with maps for the journey. They are however very different. *No Turning Back* is the work of a single ecumenical theologian writing in the light of her own wide experience and scholarship, reflecting both her own Roman Catholic perspective and the way that her ecumenical engagement had broadened her horizons. *Called to Unity for the Sake of Mission* is an anthology of essays by authors from different confessions, with a particular focus on the relationship between unity and mission, as befits a volume in a series commemorating the centenary celebration of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910. The two collections have in common that they both contain papers written in and from different contexts. It is no criticism to point out that in both collections there is considerable overlap and in some cases repetition. It means, rather, that in both cases the reader is invited into a living discussion.

*No Turning Back* is an engaging collection of seventeen papers planned by the late Margaret O’Gara and edited posthumously for publication by her husband and academic colleague, Michael Vertin. It is a sequel to her earlier book, *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange* (1998). She addresses both general and specialist readers and aims to encourage ‘the pursuit of full communion among the Christian churches’. Each chapter stands alone, reflecting the original context of the paper, and can be profitably read on its own. That was the way I first approached the book, dipping in to the themes that most