

Many talk of a ‘crisis’ in ecumenism or even of an ‘ecumenical winter’. There is bewilderment about the direction of the ecumenical movement as a whole and about its organizational instruments in particular. Even among those committed to harmonious relationships and closer collaboration between the churches there has been a certain lowering of ecumenical sights and a willingness to settle for less ambitious goals. Only a few weeks ago, I heard a bishop say publicly that ‘full visible unity’ was an unrealizable dream.

A ‘crisis’, however, is a moment of judgment, and winter is regularly followed by spring. Present difficulties may perhaps be an opportunity for something new, and not necessarily an indication that the ecumenical movement has run out of steam. Crises do, however, involve choices and the new life of spring depends on the apparent death of the old. It is against this background that the Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity is made. Sponsored by the independent American Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, its sixteen contributors are described as ‘from across the ecumene’.

As with its model, the Groupe des Dombes, the members of this group were not official representatives of their churches. They were therefore free ‘to reflect creatively on the present situation and future possibilities of modern ecumenism’. Notwithstanding its unofficial character, the list of signatories to the proposal is a roll-call of eminent ecumenists and theologians.
A consistent theme is that the apogee of ecumenical vision was the statement on ecclesiology of the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961.

The unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.

The Princeton proposal states baldly that ‘the churches’ retreat from this vision is sin’. Particular criticism is made of the World Council of Churches for abandoning this theological vision in favour of more worldly criteria for unity.

Three fundamental elements of unity propounded at New Delhi are highlighted: unity of faith and doctrine, a coordinated life of witness and service, and reciprocity of membership and ministry in continuity with the church throughout the centuries. In each case ‘following steps’ are proposed, both realistic and aspirational. Obstacles are frankly acknowledged, but so too is the conviction that ‘visible Christian unity is … not a modern dream, but a permanent and central aspect of Christian life’. The whole project is a strenuous defence of a traditional faith and order agenda.

Bill Rusch traces developments in the understanding of the unity of the Church during the twentieth-century ecumenical movement. The New Delhi statement was the high point of the articulation of the goal of unity, connecting and making explicit a number of earlier threads, giving an impetus to further reflection and creating energy for practical steps towards unity. The growing recognition of koinonia/communion as the goal was critical. This concept roots the quest for unity in the nature of the Church itself, linking present reality and eschatological fulfilment, and enabling divided Christians to recognize both the degree of communion they already enjoy and its present imperfection. It engages faith and order questions about unity with mission and the concerns of life and work. Like other contributors, Rusch sees the Harare assembly of the WCC (1998) as representing a loss of nerve and hopes that the next assembly (Porto Alegre, 2006) will return the WCC to an earlier focus on unity.

Geoffrey Wainwright describes the modern ecumenical movement in relation to the ancient ecumenical vision, subsequent divisions, missionary activity and the oikoumene to come. He shows how the varying emphases of Faith and Order, the International Missionary Council, and Life and Work came somewhat uneasily together in the World Council of Churches, leading to a continued struggle around the slogan ‘doctrine divides, service unites’ and around the ‘relation between