The Jubilee year of the World Council of Churches is over. The feverish activity in preparation for the Assembly culminating at Harare has come to an end. There is and will continue much stock taking around the world. There will also be gazes in to the future and the question what next, will be asked. The community of faith around the world will need to carry on both the review and the projection into the future with trust and hope in the one who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light to declare his wonderful deeds. The pages that follow are my humble effort to join this global effort.

The Meaning of Fifty Years of Ecumenical Journey

The work of the World Council will not be properly understood or evaluated without taking into account the concerns of the various streams that merged into the World Council such as the International Missionary Council, The Life and Work Movement and the Faith and Order Movement. It is worth recalling that the longing for the unity of the church was most intensively felt by those who experienced the scandal of division out there in the mission fields. There was an urgency in sorting out the differences in matters of faith and order in order that the scandalously divided existence of the church in the mission lands may be avoided and the oneness of the church made visible.

The themes of unity and mission have been held together in tension all through the twentieth century ecumenical movement. They need to be held together in healthy harmony, if the World Council is to be an instrument in the service of the one ecumenical movement. This point needs some stress in face of pressures from two different poles. On the one hand, there is a persistent complaint, particularly from the Orthodox Churches, that the world Council is deviating from its primary task i.e., the unity of the church. Presumably the World Council's involvement with the issues of justice, political freedom, ecology, gender etc and the global economic crises are seen as shifting the focus away from the primary task of the unity of the church. On the other hand there have been criticism of the World Council from the perspective of liberation theology questioning the relevance of unity of the church without a commitment to the struggles of the poor and the marginalised. A church which does not exercise its preferential option for the
poor, it was alleged, is irrelevant for God’s mission of liberation, whether it remained united or divided. What was primary was to express solidarity with the struggles of the poor.

Given the above polarities and other related issues it is necessary to reflect a little deeper on the relationship between unity of the church and its mission.

First of all, false and idolatrous models of the unity of the church need to be avoided. In the history of the church there have been temptations to be united over against the world. During the middle ages the crusades were examples of organizing over against the world. In the current strife in the former Yugoslavia there is an organization of Christians over against Muslims. In reaction to the rising Hindu fundamentalism in India there could be temptation for the Indian church to seek a form of unity to assert itself violently against the Hindu fundamentalists.

It is not only to combat external threat that Christians could seek idolatrous unity. Such idolatrous models of unity could be sought to pursue economic or social vested interests. In all such instances the purpose of the church in God’s design is lost sight of and the church degrades itself to the level of a purely sociological entity. On the face of fundamentalism of various sorts springing up in different quarters of the world, visions of the unity of the churches alien from a vision of the mission of the church for the sake of the Kingdom would be a real temptation. This needs to be discerned and avoided.

Secondly, the relationship between unity and mission may be conceived in instrumental or utilitarian terms. There was an element of this utilitarian attitude to unity among the missionaries in Asia and Africa who worked during the colonial era. In the preaching of the gospel the division of the churches was an inconvenience and a stumbling block. It is to be remembered that the parent churches in Europe at that time felt hardly any unease about the divisions. On the contrary, in most cases each denomination held on to its version of the truth as the truth. It was the compulsions of the mission field communicated back to the parent bodies that was in good measure responsible for the search for unity among the denominations in Europe. The divided existence of the church in Europe was a permissible condition but for the compulsions of the mission field. This instrumental or utilitarian view of unity is also very questionable. No doubt, this has been overcome in our ecumenical journey to a significant extent. This change has received visible expression not merely through the work of the World Council but also through the bilateral and multi-lateral dialogues between churches in Europe. Through such efforts the gulf between the episcopal and non-episcopal traditions has been significantly reduced, though not overcome.

While the overcoming of the utilitarian or instrumental view of the relationship between unity and mission is a welcome development, in the absence of an integral vision, it would lead to the perception of the unity as