EVANGELICALS AT AND BEYOND HARARE: CONVERGENT, DIVERGENT OR PARALLEL ECUMENISM?

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Evangelicalism and the Ecumenical Movement—a Chequered Story
Historically, evangelicalism is no stranger to ecumenism. On the contrary, evangelicalism is in a real sense a predecessor and a prime source of the contemporary ecumenical movement. Evangelicalism may be called an ecumenical forerunner in that, fully a century before the establishment of the WCC, evangelicals founded an international ecumenical body called the Evangelical Alliance (London, 1846). It took the initiative for an annual International Week of Prayer long before the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was launched.¹

Evangelicalism is a prime source of the contemporary ecumenical movement by virtue of the World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910. This broadly evangelical gathering is generally acknowledged to be the well-spring of the contemporary ecumenical movement, leading eventually to the founding of the WCC.²

Yet, the subsequent history also demonstrates the tenuous nature of the relationship between evangelicalism and ecumenism. For a time, the International Missionary Council, which had its origin in the Edinburgh Conference, remained independent of the WCC. The separate existence of the IMC made it possible for many evangelicals to be involved ecumenically in mission and evangelism without being directly engaged in the developing ecumenical movement. Conversely, evangelicals worried that the 1961 merger of IMC and the WCC would lead to a diminution of missionary emphasis and elan. In fact, John Stott, one of the most prominent leaders in the international evangelical movement, judges that after the merger, “the vision of Edinburgh 1910 suffered an almost total eclipse.”³

It is no accident, then, that after the IMC-WCC merger, evangelical groups issued major declarations on evangelism and launched large-scale evangelical declarations on mission: in 1966, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Christianity Today cosponsored the World Congress on

² Ibid., pp. 355-363.

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Evangelism in Berlin. Less than a decade later, Billy Graham was instrumental in convening an even larger evangelical event. In 1974 some 2700 participants from over 150 nations gathered in Lausanne for the International Congress on World Evangelization.

Although, evangelicals have by and large gone their separate way vis-a-vis the WCC, they do not exist in 'splendid isolation'. The way in which various groups of evangelicals relate to other Christian communions differs, depending partly on both geographical and ecclesial location. Evangelicalism includes sizeable groups within major churches that are affiliated with the WCC. But even among evangelicals within mainline churches, considerable differences exist in their relation to the ecumenical movement. At the Harare Assembly, Anglican communions, for example, were represented by delegations that include those who identify themselves as evangelicals. Thus the Church of England delegation included Dr. Elaine Storkey, a well-known evangelical leader, and the delegation of the Anglican church of Kenya was led by Archbishop David Gitari, who is an outspoken evangelical leader. He chaired some of the special meetings of evangelicals at the Harare Assembly. Similarly the Anglican Church of Australia has entire dioceses which may be characterized as evangelical and had evangelical delegates at the Harare Assembly. Further, there are evangelical churches that belong to what others would consider incompatible movements; these churches are full members of national bodies affiliated with the WEF as well as of national bodies affiliated with the WCC.

In contrast to the integral role played by evangelical groups within Anglican communions, many evangelical groups within North American mainline denominations are far more marginalized and often alienated from the ecumenical activities of their own churches. A coalition of these groups, The Association for Church Renewal, which claims a constituency of 4.5 million church members in North America, distributed a 44 page booklet critical of the direction of the WCC.

In addition, to the highly variegated positions of evangelicals described to this point, one must appreciate the special place of Pentecostalism in relation to evangelicalism. In regions such as North America, a large number of

5 For the text of the Lausanne Congress and of subsequent "Lausanne" meetings, see John Stott, ed., Making Christ Known.
6 As is the case with my own denomination, The Christian Reformed Church, which in Canada is a long-time member of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and more recently has become a member of the Canadian Council of Churches.