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WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

C O N T E N T S.

1. Statement by Dr. W.A. Visser't Hooft
2. Questions and Answers.

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

17, Route de Malagnou,
GENEVA,
Switzerland.

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STATEMENT BY THE REV. DR. W.A. VISSER 'T HOOFT,
GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES.

My attention has been called to statements which have appeared in some newspapers in South Africa declaring that the World Council of Churches is based on the teachings of humanism.

To this we would reply:

1. The basis of the World Council of Churches to which every church desiring membership must subscribe declares that the Council is a fellowship of churches which acknowledge Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches has decided to propose to the next Assembly to add to this basis the words: "according to the Holy Scriptures".
2. In the meetings and conferences of the World Council the study of the Bible holds the central place. Thus the Assembly of the World Council of Churches to be held this year in New Delhi is being prepared by bible study on the theme: "Jesus Christ - the Light of the World", a study which is to take place in the local congregations of the member churches. Similarly, at the consultation in Johannesburg much time was given to common bible study.
3. If therefore humanism is taken in the sense of faith in human reason or power rather than in the truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and His guidance, the World Council of Churches is definitely not a humanistic organization. But that does not mean that the World Council of Churches is not concerned with the needs and problems of human beings. On the contrary. Since we believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all realms of life, we seek to discern together the implications of that Lordship for human relations in social and international life and to carry out a ministry of assistance to refugees and people in need everywhere in the world.

WHAT IS THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES?

It is, according to its Constitution, "a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour". By forming the Council, 172 churches from all parts of the world and from all major Christian confessions except Roman Catholicism have expressed their desire to come to know each other, to cooperate in common tasks, to render common witness, and to seek increasingly to manifest Christian unity. They have done so because they believe that, even though they have not yet arrived at full unity in faith and order, they are called to manifest such unity as is already a reality among them. At Amsterdam they said: "We intend to stay together." Six years later at Evanston they said: "To stay together is not enough. We must go forward. As we learn more of our unity in Christ, it becomes the more intolerable that we should be divided."

The World Council is not an end in itself. It is an instrument which seeks to serve the churches in the performance of certain tasks which the churches desire to accomplish together. The nature of these activities depends on the decisions which are taken by the official representatives of the churches in its Assembly or Central Committee.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ITS BASIS?

The "Basis" of the World Council of Churches, which is the first article of its Constitution, reads: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour." In a statement on this Basis the Evanston Assembly said: "The limits of each society are dependent upon its nature. By joining together the churches seek to respond to the call and action of their Divine Lord. The World Council must therefore consist of churches which acknowledge that Lord as the second person of the Trinity."

The Basis of the World Council is not a "confession" in the sense that it seeks to express the faith of the participating churches in its fullness. It is rather a statement concerning the starting point for the conversation between the churches in the Council and the indispensable foundation of their cooperation. Only such churches are eligible for World Council membership as express agreement with the Basis. The World Council has neither the authority nor the competence to question the doctrinal position of the churches, so that it remains the responsibility of each church to decide whether it will cooperate on this Basis. Some churches have found it impossible to accept this Basis. Some others have expressed the desire that it might be slightly lengthened and made more explicit. The delegates represented at the first Assembly said unanimously that the Basis is adequate for the present purposes of the World Council, and instructed the Central Committee to keep its study of possible changes (in the Basis) within the present Christological affirmation. After the second Assembly the Central Committee set up a committee to study proposals concerning changes in the Basis. In this matter the Central Committee will consult the member churches before reporting to the third Assembly.

IS THE WORLD COUNCIL DOMINATED BY A PARTICULAR THEOLOGY?

Within the constituency of the World Council all the confessional theologies of the participating churches are represented. And to these must be added the different theological trends which cut across denominational lines. There is, therefore, no "World Council theology". Nor is it possible for any particular theological school of thought to dominate the thinking of the Council. Important theological problems are discussed in the Council such as "the nature of the Christian hope" and "the Lordship of Christ over the Church and over the World". These discussions sometimes lead to the formulation of statements or reports which are submitted to the Assembly or to the Central Committee for their commendation to the churches for study. Such statements represent the outcome of a process of confrontation of

widely diverse convictions. Only agreed statements, not statements of individuals, are to be taken as representative of the work of the Council. Care is taken that these statements not only reflect the area of agreement, but also the relevant points of disagreement which require further discussion. Thus the Council does not stand for a doctrinal relativism, or for religious syncretism. It believes that (as the first Assembly put it) "our separation has prevented us from receiving correction from one another in Christ". It stands for a frank and searching conversation about the truth of God in the hope that "the churches may be bound closer to Christ and therefore closer to one another".

HAS THE WORLD COUNCIL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH?

The authorities of the Roman Catholic Church have stated repeatedly that their church cannot enter into a council of churches. The Roman Catholic Church was not invited to send delegates to the Amsterdam Assembly. In view of the interest shown by certain Roman Catholic circles, some unofficial Roman Catholic observers were invited to attend the two Assemblies, but none of these came because such participation was forbidden by the local Roman Catholic authorities. On the other hand, some unofficial Roman Catholic observers attended the Faith and Order Conference at Lund in 1952.

In fields of practical activity such as work among refugees, departments of the Council have had occasion to cooperate with Roman Catholic bodies. Again, Roman Catholic theologians have contributed documents and reports on subjects of common theological interest. They have done this sometimes at the request of departments of the Council and sometimes on their own initiative.

IS THE WORLD COUNCIL CONCERNED WITH POLITICS?

The World Council is completely independent with regard to governmental or political bodies or parties. Within its far-flung constituency very many different convictions and attitudes on current social and political problems may be found. Its member churches live in the midst of political and economic systems which are in conflict with each other. It is the role of the Council to maintain these Christian links between the churches and so to manifest that common loyalty to the Lord of the Church which must be their primary loyalty. But that does not mean that the World Council is not concerned with the life of the nations and with society. One of the traditions which it represents is that of the "Life and Work" movement which has always stood for the bearing of Christian witness in relation to social, national and international life. The Council considers it its duty to express the common mind of the churches about the great spiritual and moral issues which have to be faced in our time. It is especially concerned with the mobilisation of the spiritual resources of the churches in the areas of "rapid social change" in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Through the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (under the common auspices of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council) it seeks to express the demands of the Christian conscience with regard to international issues. Thus it has taken a firm stand on such questions as human rights, religious liberty, the refugee problem, atomic warfare, racial discrimination, help to underdeveloped countries, etc.

IS THE WORLD COUNCIL AN ATTEMPT TO CREATE A SUPER-CHURCH?

The World Council is in no sense an administrative body which exerts authority over the churches. Its constitution states explicitly: "The World Council shall not legislate for the churches. It can only take action on behalf of constituent churches in such matters as one or more of them may commit to it." In order to make this point as clear as possible the Assembly at Amsterdam adopted a statement to the effect that "the Council is far

from desiring to usurp any of the functions which already belong to its constituent churches, or to control them, or to legislate for them". This was further elaborated by the Central Committee in 1950, when it said: "Membership in the Council does not in any sense mean that the churches belong to a body which can take decisions for them. Each church retains the constitutional right to ratify or to reject utterances or actions of the Council." In the words of William Temple: "Any authority that the Council will have will consist in the weight which it carries with the churches by its own wisdom."

It is, therefore, most misleading to describe the ecumenical movement or the Council as "the World Church", for that word suggests a type of integration and unity which does not exist. The Council is simply a servant of the churches which helps them to enter into living contact with each other and to do the things which they want to do together.

IS THE WORLD COUNCIL DOMINATED BY ANY GROUP OF CHURCHES?

The membership of the World Council is made up of churches of many different structures. It includes very old churches and very young churches. Some of the member churches have their own official relation with the state, but far more have no such connection. (Four fifths of the membership of the Central Committee represents the last category.) All the major Christian confessions (except the Roman Catholic) are represented. Thus each confessional group is a minority in the World Council. It is practically impossible for any one group of churches to dominate the life of the body as a whole and it is a matter of fact that none has tried to do so in the history of the World Council of Churches. The same is true with regard to nationalities. The Central Committee has members from 31 nations, the Executive Committee from ten nations and the World Council staff from fourteen nations. Here too, it would be practically impossible for a particular

national group to have its own way regardless of the wishes of others, and none has tried to do so in the life of the World Council of Churches. The Council seeks precisely to manifest the fullness and riches of the fellowship in Christ of churchmen of all nationalities.

It is true that the Council is prevented from going as far in some of its statements as some member churches would desire it to go by other churches which are not prepared to take such positions. This, however, must be viewed not as "domination" of one group by another but rather as a part of the ecumenical situation in which the churches are at the present time.

Practically all member churches contribute to the general budget of the Council. Each member church decides in the light of its own financial situation how much it can contribute. It is true that churches of financially stronger countries, such as the U.S.A., contribute on a much larger scale than churches of financially weaker countries. It is, however, a significant ecumenical achievement that the amount of giving has in fact had no bearing on the respective influence of the churches within the councils of the movement.

Similarly in the realm of inter-church aid the World Council seeks to establish a true solidarity between the churches so that churches which have been or are still receiving churches participate in meeting the needs of other churches and that all together decide on matters of inter-church aid policy. The World Council itself does not administer large funds for inter-church aid, but has a coordinating function in this field. Considerable funds are however received from churches, foundations and intergovernmental agencies for the specific purpose of aid to refugees and other service programmes.

The annual printed financial report of the World Council of Churches sets out all the operations in considerable detail and is freely and publicly available to anyone wishing to obtain a copy.

IS THE WORLD COUNCIL CONCERNED WITH THE LAITY?

The World Council is an ecclesiastical body in the sense that it is an official organ of the participating churches. That does not, however, mean that it is a body of and for "ecclesiastics". There are fifteen laymen on its 90-member Central Committee. Many laymen are active in the various World Council committees, notably in those of the Study Division, the Ecumenical Institute and the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (the last is a common commission with the International Missionary Council). Moreover the Council is specially active in helping the churches to mobilise the lay forces in the churches. The Ecumenical Institute (near Geneva) makes it its business to help laymen in different professions to witness to the relevance of the Gospel for their work. The Department on the Cooperation of Men and Women in Church and Society stands for the conviction that "it is inherent in our faith that men and women are called and sent together to do God's Will in the Church and in society" and reminds "the churches of the opportunities which lie before them for a true witness to the purposes underlying God's creation of the two sexes". The Department on the Laity helps the churches to see that, as Evanston said, "the real battles of faith to-day are being fought in factories, offices, shops and farms, in political parties and government agencies, in countless homes, in the press, radio and television, in the relationships of nations".

HOW IS THE WORLD COUNCIL CONCERNED WITH THE MISSIONARY AND EVANGELISTIC TASK OF THE CHURCH?

One of the functions specifically mentioned in the Wor'd Council's Constitution is "to support the churches in their task of evangelism". The Amsterdam Assembly therefore set up a Department on Evangelism which promotes the study of the theological and practical problems of evangelism in the modern world.

The concern of the World Council with world mission and evangelism also finds clear expression in the fact that at the time of its first Assembly it entered into association with the International Missionary Council, the body formed by the Missionary Councils in the Western world and the national Christian councils in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. The cooperation between the two world bodies led to a number of common undertakings such as the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs and the East Asia Secretariat. In 1957 the IMC and the WCC sponsored together a conference of delegates from the churches and councils in East Asia where it was decided to form an East Asia Christian Conference which will cooperate closely with the two world bodies.

Thirty churches in Asia and Africa which have grown up as a result of the work of the modern missionary movement have joined the World Council. Nearly all of the departments of the Council have become concerned with specific aspects of missionary work. In 1951 the Central Committee approved a statement on "The Calling of the Church to Mission and Unity" from which we quote: "The obligation to take the Gospel to the whole world and the obligation to draw all Christ's people together both rest upon Christ's whole work and are indissolubly connected. Every attempt to separate those two tasks isolates the wholeness of Christ's ministry to the world. Both of them are, in the strict sense of the word, essential to the being of the Church and the fulfilment of its functions as the Body of Christ."

It was therefore natural that the World Council and the International Missionary Council decided to elaborate a plan through which the integration of these two bodies might be effected. This plan has been prepared and is now being studied by the member churches of the World Council and the member councils of the International Missionary Council.

WHAT IS THE ATTITUDE OF THE WORLD COUNCIL TOWARDS CHURCH UNITY?

The World Council does not attempt to effect the union of churches in faith and order. Each church in the Council remains wholly free in its decisions concerning the nature of its relations with other churches. The Council, notably through its Commission on Faith and Order, helps the churches to study the issues of church unity. Thus it seeks to remove misunderstandings and to promote a frank facing of existing differences. At the same time, by bringing the churches into living contact with each other through its conferences, courses and inter-church activities, it seeks to foster that sense of ecumenical solidarity and fellowship which is the indispensable basis for any advance towards Christian unity.

Within the constituency of the Council many different conceptions of church unity are represented. As the Central Committee has stated (1950): "Membership in the World Council does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Church unity." The Council cannot identify itself with any particular conception of unity, because its raison d'être is precisely to serve as a meeting place where these various convictions are confronted with each other. The Council has however gone on record as disavowing "any thought of becoming a single unified church structure independent of the churches" or "a structure dominated by a centralised administrative authority". The Council is an instrument of the churches which helps to prepare the way for unity.
