

Witnessing to Christ Today: The 2010 Edinburgh Conference

Philippa Hitchen of Vatican Radio reports on June's international centenary conference

Christianity is a living, breathing body: inhaling through worship and sacraments, exhaling through witness and practical action. The more we can breathe together across the different churches and ecclesial communities, the more we can provide authentic and convincing testimony to God's love for all men and women.

That was the principle outlined at the start of the Edinburgh 2010 conference, marking 100 years since the first World Missionary Conference met in the same Scottish city to discuss ways of working more closely together to spread the faith to the non-Christian world.

Back in June 1910 the participants, numbering over 1,200, were largely "pale and male" – that is Europeans or North American men, from mostly Protestant or Reformed Churches. There was one African delegate, a handful of Asians and no Latin Americans at all, since that area of the world was not deemed to be mission territory.

At that time, Scotland was seen as a key centre for evangelisation, home to many well known missionaries of the previous century, including Robert Moffat and the legendary David Livingstone. As the conference was convened hopes were high that such intrepid pioneers and their missionary societies could bring the light and truth of Christ to the furthest corners of the earth - within just a generation or two.

But at that crucial encounter, thanks in part to the impassioned appeals of those few delegates from what we today call the global south, another truth also began to dawn in the hearts and minds of the delegates. As a young Indian participant, co-founder of the first Indian Missionary Society, called for equality and friendship between missionaries and local Christians, these older missionary pioneers began to realise that the body of Christ was broader and deeper than most of them had ever imagined, not limited to their Western languages, cultures or ways of worshipping, but already thriving amongst believers of very different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Not only did participants pledge to overcome conflicts and cooperate more closely between the different denominations, but they also saw the need for an end to colonial attitudes and a new partnership with the recipients of Christian mission. **A telling anecdote was recounted by a South African delegate about the missionaries who first came to the continent: "in those days", he said, "we had our land and they had their bible. They said 'Let us pray', and we did, but when we opened our eyes again we had their bible and they had our land".**



The change of attitude at that conference is now widely acknowledged as birth of the modern ecumenical movement, a new way of working and worshipping alongside - rather than in opposition to - Christians of different churches and communities, a movement the Catholic Church fully endorsed at the Second Vatican Council.

So a century later, over three hundred delegates gathered once again in the Scottish capital to take up the challenge of 'witnessing to Christ' in a more globalised and multicultural world than their predecessors could ever have imagined. While the number of participants was smaller, they came from all the continents and from a very wide spectrum of Anglican, Catholic, Evangelical, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox, Reformed and Pentecostal traditions.

"Authentic, respectful and humble witness"

The five day conference concluded with a service of recommitment led by the Anglican Archbishop of York, John Sentamu. Participants issued a Common Call for an 'authentic, respectful and humble witness to Christ' which shows hospitality, welcomes diversity, seeks reconciliation and promotes justice and peace in the world.

So where will it all lead? Heading the Catholic delegation to the conference, Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, noted that Edinburgh 2010 was 'not expected to solve all the questions on the table' that continue to divide the Christian churches. He reiterated the Catholic Church's commitment to the realisation of Jesus's prayer 'that they may all be one'. He said the atmosphere of trust and cooperation in Edinburgh marked a tangible step forward from a similar encounter in Nairobi in 2007, where representatives of so many different Christian traditions had gathered for the first time under the auspices of the Global Christian Forum. 'Mission is a commandment and unity is a prayer', he stressed; while we have to admit we don't have all the answers, 'we are totally committed to searching for them'.