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THE EVANSTON ASSEMBLY, 1954: AN EDITORIAL

THE World Council of Churches in its second Assembly held at Evanston, Illinois, in August 1954, registered a definite stage of attainment in ecumenical fraternity. Evidence for this judgement is not to be found in any striking pronouncements that emerged from the proceedings; rather, we must look at the spirit in which the work of the Council was carried on, more at what was quietly accepted than at what was deliberately announced. At the inaugural Amsterdam meeting in 1949, there was a prevailing sense of adventure into novelty. A new and momentous step was being taken, and this contributed a spirit of excitement to the proceedings, whereas, at Evanston, the existence of the Council was recognized as an accomplished achievement and the dominant mood was a certain joyfulness of spirit, one of realized fellowship rather than problematic co-operation. It would not be too much to say that Evanston brought into clear vision and evident experience the fact that a new spiritual climate for joint ecclesiastical action had been generated.

There were inevitable tensions in a series of meetings that gathered together so many churches into one place from such diversities of condition and ancestry. But the striking fact was that the emergent differences of view-point did not fall within ecclesiastical alignments. They cut across the Churches and did not become rallying-points for confessional witness. This was particularly evident in the discussions that ranged around the main theme—Christ, the Hope of the World. The theme itself might have been supposed to provide a focus for devotion rather than an arena for debate, a banner under which Christian people could unite to proclaim a message to a distracted world rather than a topic around which learned theologians could expose their differences to a perplexed audience of their fellow-Christians. There was general agreement that our Hope is in Christ, and that therefore, in face of perplexity that often darkens into despair, we can meet the future not only in undaunted confidence, but with eager expectation—that, indeed, Christians are the only people who can dare to hope in this present evil world. But, as to whether this implies that there is hope *for* this world as well as hope *in* this world, there were most acute divergencies of opinion that were never fully resolved. Nevertheless, the point to be observed is that these profound discussions, that brought to light cleavages reaching back into the entire history of our faith, did not divide the Council by *Churches*. There was no ranging into rival camps with mutual denunciations. Rather, they brought us to realize that we have all yet to enter into the fulness that is in Christ.

The real Hope that stirred the Council was its own existence, that the Body of Christ is an actuality in the world, that Our Lord is present with His people in every part of the inhabited earth, and that when they meet, they share a common faith and unite with Him Who is the Head of the Church in worship, even in communion at His table. For we had "open" communions, "open" to all baptized believers, in which we participated without strain, rather, with holy joy. We could also work together. At Evanston, it was realized that the World Council is much more than a quinquennial conference, that lines of concerted action had been undertaken and were further proposed to help the needy churches and, even more, the needy people of the world—the refugees, the hungry, the naked and the dispossessed. There is a World Church in the Churches, even if its corporate identity still awaits fulness of realization.