

ACTION/REFLECTION PROGRAMME: PARTICIPATION IN CHANGE

SOME QUESTIONS ANSWERED

I. Why should the WCC and the Division of Ecumenical Action be concerned to undertake this programme, and to do it in this way?

a) Maybe, basically, the concern of the Division has been a pastoral one. Christians in most parts of the world are pressured by change. They may treat it like the weather, fasten their coat collars, and hope to battle through. They may welcome change uncritically on the assumption that any change in their situation is bound to be for the better. Everywhere there is a need for gifts of discrimination to sift change which has to be welcomed or initiated from that which must simply be suffered or adjusted to. Christians need to recognize that facing times of bewilderment is part of the business of living out their faith, and they need courage to act relevantly and imaginatively to the actualities or possibilities of change within the horizons of their own life. They can find resources in fellow Christians and the provision God makes for two or three who gather together - and also in others who cannot share their faith but who see the point about dealing with change and are prepared to join in.

b) The Division had no conviction about a Geneva-centred enterprise. We are hearing strong pleas for regionalization and decentralization, and these pleas were made in the Divisional Committee, with effect. There is good reason for dispersing an action/reflection programme. In different parts of the world circumstances are very different, and they need to be assessed locally with full weight given to their particularity. Moreover, the freedom people have in different parts of the world varies greatly. In some parts the Christian has been paralysed when a great deal of freedom to understand the situation and influence it has been open to him. In other situations, change which brings material benefits may be being accepted too uncritically when resistance movements to it should be started. In other situations, all that seems possible is to preserve "a little life in dried tubers", and to accept with patience a period of suffering, maybe persecution, with the actual suffering itself and prayer as the only things which give hope of change. In any one situation, different action is called for, at different pressure-points, with a different timing. The positive acceptance of participation in change must find expression in the concretion of local situations and of specific responses.

Yet change is a world-wide phenomenon. It will be strange if there are not common characteristics within a region, and if there are not large world-issues which are pointed to by people wrestling in different

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local situations to control specific features of change. Emphasis must be placed on the locality in which people live, which they can come to know at first hand; but they will be isolated if it is left at that. Contact within a region should allow it to come clear which of the issues faced have a regional bearing, and should put groups in contact with one another so that they can fruitfully share experiences and draw strength from one another. Where international dimensions show themselves both locally and regionally, this can afford a useful check-up on those issues thought to be of international importance from the eyrie of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. To belong to a world fellowship and study may bring home to some the reality of belonging to a world church.

c) The idea of an intellectual exercise involving only experts gained no support in the Division. There was a clear conviction about the need to involve and draw on the gifts and experience of all who were prepared to grapple with change. This did not mean cutting out groups of experts whose skills might be needed to evaluate some specific features of change. It was simply that the programme should not be confined to them. The Division wanted to take seriously the wisdom of ordinary people who were prepared to get together and size up the situation in which they were placed and find where they could take a grip on it in a reaction which was not blind but purposive. This must not mean a lowering of standards of approach. Hard work must be done on evaluating local situations, sifting out action-opportunities, gauging effects - otherwise the exercise will be mere opinion-sharing and general sloppiness.

d) The programme the Division decided upon turns out to be a real enterprise for the involvement and reflection of the laity, and so can be seen as a natural successor to the earlier work of the Department on Laity. The foundation-stone of that work was a theological reappraisal of the concept of the Church which, in effect, reinherited the whole people of God - as Vatican II also did, later on. There was then a period when thought concentrated on particular problems arising out of this, such as the relationship of the ordained and lay in the whole laos, and the rhythm of involvement and reflection appropriate to a full Christian life. In this rethinking, the laity themselves were involved, but in relatively small groups. It, accordingly, seems natural to move to an experiment in which any member of the Church who wants to can take part, anywhere in the world.

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II. How might it work out in practice?

Imagine a town or village anywhere.

One or two people are prepared to spend time and sweat on understanding forces of change in their own area. They have come together either because they have heard of this programme and think it might help them to deal with their own situation, or because a coordinator of the programme in their part of the world has encouraged them to get together, and they have seen the point of responding positively.

First, they will look at themselves. They will check on whether important angles of judgement are missing because of the absence of e.g. young people, women, laymen immersed in the world, Orthodox and Roman Catholic, and non-Christian participants. In certain instances this kind of check-up may be irrelevant - if the group is a specialist one, the only thing that may matter can be getting all the necessary forms of expertise represented. Generally, it would be part of the exercise that groups should be as inclusive as possible.

In any one town there could be a) mixed groups of people with quite different types of responsibility b) groups specializing in one facet of problems of change. They could be already in existence, or they could be brought into being through the development of this particular programme.

The group will appoint their own leader, who may or may not be the local initiator, and reporter.

They will proceed somewhat as follows:

A. They will pinpoint significant changes in their own area, checking with those who are strategically placed in their community to note types of change which are taking place;

B. They will select some features on which they might do a job of work, carefully eliminating those which are already being tackled otherwise (unless they see their main responsibility as participation in some larger operation), and those requiring resources unavailable to them;

C. They will study the selected types of pressure falling on people thoroughly, making sure that their knowledge is not superficial, but checked - inviting people in authority, and those with particular skills to confirm or question their judgements;

D. They might then select one or possibly two points at which people need to be helped to adjust to, resist, or initiate change, and set themselves to find the appropriate means for making impact (e.g. action through pressure groups, letter-campaign to papers, staging a dramatic incident, protest and demonstration, door-to-door canvassing, forms of confrontation, a variety of educational programmes: it is what suits the situation that must be found);

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E. They will keep checking that their plans are realistic, and if one approach fails, they will try others;

F. Wherever a stage has been reached at which success or failure can be registered, they will do this with ruthless honesty, remembering that success and failure have both useful lessons to learn from;

G. They will share critical reflections on their own work with other groups, and also receive from these groups so that there is an interflow of support and of ideas;

H. When one operation has been completed, the group will turn to the next priority.

The group will stay in being only so long as it is convinced about a job to which it has set its hand. If ever it gets to the point where people are meeting simply for the sake of meeting, this will be taken as a signal to disband. The group may also bring other groups into being where it feels that other facets of change require also other approaches, maybe general, maybe specialist in character.

The area coordinator may encourage some groups into existence, and find other groups already in existence. In either case, he or she will act as a link-person, keeping in touch with the groups, and keeping them in touch with other groups in the area; and as a resource person who can be turned to when a group goes through a particularly sticky patch or finds a road opening out in a particularly exciting and demanding way. The area coordinators will also be able to keep groups in touch with main features of this programme as they exhibit themselves in a region.

Groups would feel free to express their insights and frustrations in a variety of ways. They might write songs or prayers to share with others. They might produce a list of hints from experience of 'do's and don'ts'. They might share methods for getting clues to a right assessment of situations and the relevant action. They might sum up a bit of experience in a picture drawn by an artist member or a drama or mime prepared by someone connected with the theatre. They might shape elements of their experience into case-studies. They might work out a dance to represent the ebb and flow of the struggle as men grappled with change. They might think of a hundred ways which I have not mentioned.

III. What might it look like, if the programme gets established?

Maybe the best picture would be a cobweb of communication stretching all over the world, and keeping people sufficiently in touch so that if a big fly were caught at this and that point all the different parts where

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the web touched would be sensitively related and aware of what was happening.

Threads would go from every part of the world which chose to participate to Geneva, where the Division of Ecumenical Action would act as a resource-body for the whole enterprise and would be responsible for evaluating its significance and discovering international perspectives which were emerging. But the strongest threads would be regional and would run from a regional coordinator (who would have a substantial slice of the earth's surface to care for) to area coordinators, who, in turn, would have lines out to all the groups working in localities. Cross-links would also be established between groups directly, wherever they felt they could learn from and support one another by establishing direct contact. At whatever level seems appropriate, probably the regional level, means will be found to share knowledge of the stumbling-blocks encountered and the insights gained, by printed matter or tape or disc, or film-strip - or whatever method seems appropriate.

Thus local initiative and action would have its own validity. But it would gain other dimensions from the regional and international gathering-points.

The regional coordinator would meet with area coordinators once per year for a few days to review the developing situation. The staff of the Division would use their travel-programmes to keep in touch with regional and area coordinators, and with local groups, wherever possible.

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IV. How will the programme get off the ground?

From the Division we are making two forms of contact a) with regional and national councils of churches b) directly with movements, groups and individuals known to be concerned with change. We hope by enquiry to find leadership at regional, area and local levels by cross-checking suggestions which come in from these various quarters. We are looking for people who may be unknown to the World Council of Churches, and we are trying to keep clear of those who already have WCC commitments, many of whom may be already overloaded. Part of the exercise is to discover new potential in the world church.

Accordingly, in any area participation could begin through a) suggestions from the Council of that area regarding individuals and groups which might participate or b) knowledge of a similar kind possessed by a regional or area coordinator about possible points of initiative or c) people who hear about the programme directly, believe they should take part in it, get going and keep the area coordinator in touch or d) groups already concerned and active re coping with change, who see the value of linking up and taking part in the programme.

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The time for groups to get started would be simply the time of conviction that they should tackle explicitly some of the pressures of change in their own locality. In the same town or in neighbouring towns one group could start now and another 18 months on, and they would equally belong to the partnership of enterprise.

There is a problem of getting groups started, giving them something to bite on. If something is not provided, some groups find it difficult to get started. But if something is provided from Geneva, this may limit and cramp the form in which local initiative would naturally express itself. Groups which see the point of the study should be able to draw up their own agenda for tackling their local situation, find the areas of importance, establish relevant priorities. But material can be provided to help groups to get going by the use of areas of concern agreed by the Divisional Committee to be of universal importance. (This is not being said merely theoretically: an outline of the study under its previous form was sent out for comment in all six continents - more than half of the 150 contacts replied, and their common agreement was that a theme like "Participation in Change" was "right on the button", meeting them at a point of real need). Even if some of these themes are used to help people select the areas of importance for their own work, and to give some definition to that work, other themes can be added which have more significance than some of those already suggested.

V. What are these areas of concern which seem to have touched a nerve in different parts of the world?

The Divisional Committee called them 'areas of entry', since they could suggest some common features of our contemporary world, within which people might recognize local aspects, and this recognition would provide a point of entry into their own situation, so that they see where to concentrate. The areas of entry selected were as follows:

- a) Points of confrontation, dialogue and participation, both between the generations and between established powers and emancipatory powers in many fields.
- b) Pressures in the areas of work, unemployment and leisure.
- c) The implementation of human rights, especially the emancipation of the sexes and the races from dehumanizing domination systems.
- d) Problems of national self-determination, indigenization, and the impact of cultures upon one another.
- e) Matters concerned with contemporary patterns of religious worship, Christian community and celebration of life.

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f) Education for change: how to educate people to cope with change and how to direct changes by means of education.

VI. What chance does the project have of succeeding?

The whole programme could turn out to be just a nice idea worked out on paper. If there is no local initiative there will be no programme. If the whole focus of the project on the pressures of change and means whereby people can deal with them seems to have little relevance in the regions, then there will be no pick-up. The responses we have had suggest the subject is one of acute interest everywhere. In some parts of the world (e.g. in the People Next-Door enterprise in Britain) something similar has been tried, but on the limited scale of a nation or group of nations. Some people have the conviction that there is more potential and initiative in the regions than is known. The concrete test is whether people in their local situations see the programme as relevant. If they do, we are sailing. If they do not, we cannot leave harbour.

The need for regionalization as against centralization in Geneva of projects, personnel and finance was heard by the Division, and listened to with sympathy. It decided to go ahead, knowing that a risk was involved. They believed that risks must be taken if the World Council of Churches is to do things with and for the churches rather than instead of.

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VII. If it succeeds, what might come out of it?

Locally

Christians may learn not to fear change and shield themselves from its consequences, but to face up to change, discriminate regarding where they need to adjust, to resist, and to initiate it, take action in terms of their own reading of the local situation, and exchange experience with other people, similarly placed or very differently placed, who also are prepared to struggle to deal with change instead of letting change deal with them like a ping-pong ball. Out of it all could come an exercise in living by faith in the twentieth century with eyes wide open to the realities of the world. Out of it also could come a gathering of biblical and theological insights as people see where there is fresh impact from the scriptures upon their own situation and discover ways in which God's claim on all life is illuminated by their own study and action. One of the best fruits may well be ~~more~~ rurer and better equipped Christians. Moreover, if the process of checking on the membership of the group is taken seriously, new allies will be discovered in the local

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situation, who will be specially valuable if they bring fresh critical angles to bear.

Regionally

Regionally there may be the growth of areas of new life which can spark off new life in other parts of the region.

There may be a much better knowledge of the things people are really struggling with at the grass-roots level, and an awareness of concerns which are of a) local and b) general regional significance.

There may be important clues about leadership potential in the area which had previously been unknown or untested.

There may be an encouragement of a sense of regional identity through mutual contribution, with the thought-forms, languages, and imagery appropriate to that part of the world retained in full.

The whole exercise might turn out to be one which provided pointers to indicate what other WCC work might be regionalized and how - snags and pitfalls might be diagnosed, and some realistic assessment of advantages be made.

Experience may be gained regarding how groups can be got in being and kept in touch in such a way that there is a fellowship of enterprise. The approaches will be very different from area to area and not only from region to region; so a variety of ways in which groups can be initiated and kept in touch with one another may be found.

From the tackling of pressures felt at the local level and the discovery of means to bring needed change about some evidence may be gained regarding how institutional forms of the Church can be reformed (sometimes there is an awareness of the need to change but a paralysis about how to begin to bring change about). Again, since different forms of help to produce institutional change will be needed in different parts of the world, the regionalization of the programme may have special significance.

Division of Ecumenical Action and W.C.C. in General

Is the World Council of Churches occupied with questions which concern the Christian family scattered all over the globe? This needs to be continually tested. It is tested to some extent by the two-way traffic of staff travelling outwards and representatives from all corners of the earth coming together for committees and consultations. But it

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is widely agreed that only occasionally and sporadically is there feedback from the membership of the world church in general. This could provide it, at least more adequately than has been the case till now.

What kind of help is needed and wanted by the Church all over the earth from its small headquarters resource body, the World Council of Churches? What can such a small headquarters resource body, and particularly the Division of Ecumenical Action, do and not do, realistically, to respond to the need made known? These are questions which must be thought through again and again by the churches themselves and by the Geneva staff. This programme could bring some clarification into that area of concern.

Biblical and theological insights may emerge which indicate how people who are prepared to struggle with pressures towards change may live out their Christian faith in the thick of these pressures. This kind of biblical and theological contribution is little available in Geneva compared with what is provided by professionals: and it would be a contribution of rare value.

Studies are taking place on Man, on his nature and destiny, on how he understands himself and how he is to be understood in the context of the world of our time. There will be a great deal of expert contribution to this subject. The Director of the studies would also like to see a substantial contribution from the people of God themselves based on the experiences of daily life. He sees the participation in change action-reflection programme as his best hope of getting this kind of direction-finder and check-up on the development of the studies.

New leadership potential may be tapped. The tendency in any body like the WCC is to tow upon a limited circle of known people for committees, consultations and conferences. The study-action programme would provide opportunity for the WCC to enlarge its knowledge regarding the human resources available in the field.

It may be possible to get some international perspective on matters which are of regional or world importance so that those who have to struggle with specifically regional concerns in one part of the globe may at least have the understanding and sympathy of those who live in other regions; and so that issues which are of importance everywhere may be given attention as world issues. Christians at one end of the earth may discover themselves to be helped by and helpers of others at the other end of the earth making the world community of the Church vivid in the process. Where men and women of different faiths and of none cooperate out of a sense of responsibility for the whole life of man, there is an enlargement of human fellowship itself - and that has world significance.

When people meet, ordained and lay together, men and women together, people of different races together, people of different faiths together, youth and age together, not because of some artificially contrived scheme

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but out of their willingness to deal with the intractable realities which face them in their own situation they will find a) their need of one another b) what the Holy Spirit will do with the few loaves and fish that they bring. To see what the Spirit will say to the churches and do with the churches is the main point of the operation.

VIII. How long will the programme go on, and how do you expect it all to come out?

The length of time will depend on the dynamic of the enterprise in different parts of the world. It could be a one-year programme, and realistically it may be for some. It could be a twenty-year programme, and realistically it may be for others. It could be that the role of the World Council of Churches is to stay at the centre of the web without centralizing the action - or it could be that the WCC may be providing something like the first stage of a rocket, which, once the programme has gained its own momentum, will fall away, leaving the whole enterprise entirely to regional and local development, and merely keeping in touch so that it can be aware of what is happening and spread that awareness.

There is no plan to sum up the programme or give it focus at any one particular point (say that of the next World Assembly of the WCC). At the annual meeting of regional and area coordinators there will be consideration of whether, according to the development in the region itself, there seems need for some drawing together - e.g. through a dramatic focus, a new publication, an attempt to bring about a world gathering to read the signs of the times or ... If, however, the indications are that the programme is best kept local and the development (in terms of publicity) inconspicuous, that is how it will be done.

If the programme dies early and un lamented, no artificial respiration will be applied. If it lives we must each learn as we go. What if we have light for only one step ahead? We must walk that step and pray for more light.

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