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CHURCH UNION IN SOUTH INDIA.

By THE REV. G. E. PHILLIPS, London Missionary Society.

FEW of us realize the growth of the Christian Church in the many countries where Missionary Societies have been at work. In nearly every land to-day the Church of Christ is in being. There are no available statistics, but it certainly is numbered by millions, and its growth is almost startling in its rapidity. Not the least of the results of the recent meeting of the International Missionary Council at Jerusalem is a fresh realization of the Church throughout all the world, and not the least important volume of the report is that which deals with the relations between the Older and Younger Churches. Every thoughtful student of that volume must realize that the life of these younger Churches will inevitably have powerful reactions upon the life of the older Churches. More important, however, than their effect upon us is their attempt to equip themselves for the vast task of evangelizing the whole world. It is now an accepted truism that the evangelization of the great non-Christian countries has to be carried out not by the foreign Missionary Societies directly, but by indigenous Churches, with which the foreign Missionary Societies co-operate and around which they centre all their operations.

These younger Churches have each their own characteristics, which in itself is an indication of genuine life. But amid all varieties there is an impressive agreement in the desire for Christian unity and if possible for organic union in Church life. The closing three paragraphs of the statement published at Jerusalem are motivated by intense and widespread feeling amongst the younger Churches and must be quoted here in full.

"This statement would be seriously incomplete without reference to the desire which is being expressed with increasing emphasis among the younger churches to eliminate the complexity of the missionary enterprise and to remove the discredit to the Christian name, due to the great numbers of denominations and the diversity and even competition of the missionary agencies now at work in some countries.

"It is fully recognized that it is not the function of the International Missionary Council to pronounce upon questions of ecclesiastical polity. At the same time the Council is only performing an inescapable duty when it appeals to the older churches to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards the longings expressed by the younger churches for a more rapid advance in Christian reunion.

"We appeal also to the older churches to encourage and support the younger churches when, in facing the challenging task of evangelizing the non-Christian world, they take steps, according to their ability, to solve what perhaps is the greatest problem of the Universal Church of Christ."

Whether we study recent developments in China or India, in Persia or East Africa, or listen to the representatives of the younger Churches at the Lausanne Conference, we hear a united voice demanding that some way of closer union shall be found, or appeal-

ing to the older Churches, however great may be their difficulties in their own countries, to encourage the younger in their attempts to solve this great problem of the Universal Church.

There are three possible lines of development for the younger Churches in relation to Christian unity.

First, they might all retain their denominational affiliation to the Churches in the West which brought them into existence, so that there would ultimately be world-wide Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches, having no more connection with each other abroad than at home. Various abstract considerations in favour of this development might be advanced, but they would be useless, for the simple reason that native opinion has decisively rejected it. In all the Eastern countries leaders of the younger Churches are insisting that the divisions represented by the existing denominations have not the same meaning for them as for us; that if they must have divisions they will develop their own in the natural course of history; but first they wish to make a great effort to be united and to be themselves, not imitations of Western Christians. If we from the older Churches were so misguided as to attempt to impose upon them for the future our Western denominational divisions, the inevitable result would be the exploration of the second theoretical possibility.

That is the formation of National Churches, in the narrowest sense of the term national, which would refuse to have anything to do with Churches from the West because they were foreign, and which thus would be cut off from fellowship with the Church Catholic. There have already been little groups of Christians opposed to the foreigner in China and India, whose nationalism was so fierce that in a crisis they felt nearer to their non-Christian fellow-countrymen than to the followers of Christ who belonged to a different race. We cannot blame them or throw stones, for we in Europe have seen Churches which in war crises opposed each other when they should have stood together, because their national feeling proved stronger than their common Christianity. We should see that kind of thing on an enormous scale if we attempted to force our Western denominationalism upon Churches in the East, and it would be a first-class disaster to the Christian religion. It would mean the abandonment of the vision of one Holy Church throughout all the world, maintaining unbroken its Christian fellowship.

The only remaining alternative seems to be that Christians in the Mission Field should unite together in large bodies if possible, with simple constitutions suited to their own needs, national in the sense that they embody their religious life in forms suited to their own genius and are under no control from Churches or societies in other countries, but in full fellowship with the various branches of the Church in the West. This last alternative surely is the most promising, and it is being explored in most of the major fields, especially in China and in India. In South India for twenty years past there has been a body called the South India United Church including in its membership all Christians whose Church ancestry

was Congregational or Presbyterian. The experience of these twenty years provides testimony to the value of this method, for the Church has not merely grown in numbers but still more in indigenous quality and leadership. It is rapidly advancing in self-support, and in the production of distinctively Indian forms of worship and of work it has achieved what would have been impossible to its separate units in isolation.

Now much more important proposals are being prepared. Anglicans, Wesleyans and members of the South India United Church are making plans which will soon come before their respective Church authorities. These bodies between them form the vast majority of the Protestant Christians in South India and represent a total Christian community of something like 700,000. "Our sole desire," they say, "is so to organize the Church in India that it shall give the Indian expression of the spirit, the thought, and the life of the Church Universal."

The following is from the Proceedings of the Joint Committee :

"Believing that the historic Episcopate in a constitutional form is the method of Church Government which is more likely than any other to promote and preserve the organic unity of the Church, we accept it as a basis of union without raising other questions about episcopacy.

"By a historic and constitutional Episcopate we mean—

- "(a) that the bishops shall be elected. In the election both the diocese concerned and the province shall have an effective voice ;
- "(b) that the bishops shall perform their duties constitutionally in accordance with such customs of the Church as shall be defined in a written constitution ;
- "(c) that continuity with the historic episcopate be effectively maintained, it being understood that no particular interpretation of the fact of the historic episcopate be demanded."

It is further agreed

- (a) That the Church in India ought to be independent of the State.
- (b) That the Church in India must be free from any control, legal or otherwise, of any Church or Society outside of India.
- (c) That while the Church in India is free from such control, it would regulate its acts by the necessity of maintaining fellowship with other branches of the Catholic Church with which we are now in Communion.

As to the difficult subject of the Ministry of the United Church, it is agreed that the existing ministers of the three uniting Churches will be accepted after union as full ministers of the Word and sacraments, but no minister ordained before the union will minister temporarily in any church or congregation without the consent of the parish minister and the congregation.

"It is the intention and expectation of those who enter into this union that eventually every minister exercising a permanent ministry in the Church will be an episcopally ordained minister."

"It is agreed that for the thirty years succeeding the union, the ministers of any Church whose Missions have founded the originally separate parts of the united Church may be received as ministers of the united Church, if they are willing to make the same declarations with regard to the Faith and Con-

stitution of the united Church as are required from persons about to be ordained or employed for the first time in the united Church."

"After this period of thirty years, the Church will consider and decide the question of such exceptions to the general principle of an episcopally ordained ministry."

The United Church will seek to maintain fellowship with those branches of the Christian Church with which the uniting bodies severally enjoyed such fellowship. If its Bishops are invited to Lambeth they will, if possible, attend. At the same time the Church will seek affiliation to the World Union of Congregational Churches, the World Presbyterian Alliance and the Œcumenical Methodist Conference. Just as at present the Church of Sweden is in communion alike with the Episcopal Churches and with non-episcopal Lutheran Churches, so the United Church of South India will be in full fellowship with both episcopal and non-episcopal bodies, a position which might at any moment prove important in the promotion of any yet wider form of union.

As to Intercommunion and Intercelebration,

"it is the intention of the uniting Churches that during the early period of union, during which all or most of its ministers and members will be persons who have previously belonged to the uniting Church as separate bodies, none of such ministers or members shall forego any rights with regard to intercommunion and inter-celebration which they possessed before the union. It is equally the intention of the uniting Churches that none of their ministers and members shall be required to do anything in these matters to which they may have conscientious objections. They are assured that the united Church will in these matters avoid on the one hand any encouragement of licence or condonation of breaches of Church comity and fellowship, and on the other hand any un-Christian rigidity in its regulations or in their application; and that in all its actions it will seek the preservation of unity within, the attainment of wider union, and the avoidance of immediate contests on particular cases.

"Within the united Church itself, it follows directly from the fact of union, that any communicant member of the united Church shall be at liberty to receive communion in any of the churches of the united Church."

This is a brief account of some of the matters upon which the Joint Committee is agreed as to the recommendation to be submitted to the Churches. Various important related subjects are still under discussion. Further, while the machinery for possible reunion is under consideration, equally important efforts are being made to spread the spirit without which such machinery would be useless.

Three observations on these proposals may be made.

First. The ultimate decision of these grave matters ought to rest with the Churches in India, and the Churches in Britain or America must not hinder them. At the recent Jerusalem meeting principles were laid down which have received general approval, governing the relation which ought to exist between the younger and the older Churches. Perhaps the first definite test of whether our approval of those principles is sincere will come in connection with these proposals from South India. The uniting bodies will doubtless consult the Societies and Churches in Europe and America with which they are at present affiliated, which will involve all members

of those Societies and Churches in the heavy responsibility of giving Christian counsel on a matter affecting the whole future of the Christian Church. But advice must not become peremptory, and it must be made clear in all discussions that the younger Churches are expected to follow the guidance of the Spirit of God in faith and in freedom.

Second. The acceptance of the decision to be made by the younger Churches, if it is in favour of these proposals, will land us in all kinds of practical difficulties, so that we should be foolish merely to cheer them with a light heart. It is conceivable that they may lead to the breaking up of many of our present organizations. They will entail consequences highly inconvenient. The question for our study is not whether they are convenient but whether they are right in principle. Unless in the home country also we move forward along the path to reunion there will be grave difficulties. But great things might happen in thirty years even in the home country. Is it impossible that the present controversy and chaos may be the prelude to a new gift from above of light and peace and Christian unity to our divided Church at home?

Third. Our chief difficulty on the whole subject is to range widely enough in our Christian thinking. We are opening a new chapter in the story of the expansion of the Christian Church, comparable with the story of those first three centuries when the Roman Empire was conquered, but dealing with an immensely magnified scale of operations. Once St. Paul prayed "that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to principalities and powers in the heavenly places." What was the actual Church when he offered that prayer? Handfuls of humble folk scattered over ten provinces of the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean basin. How that Church has expanded over the wider world of to-day! As we open the first pages of this new chapter in its history, have we a vision large enough to realize what is at stake? It is not merely the success or failure of the missionary enterprise—that in any case will disappear when the great Churches, old and young, join hands in winning the world. It is even more than the salvation of unborn generations in populous Eastern lands. It is the manifestation through the whole company of the redeemed of the greater glory of God. We find ourselves bogged in ancient controversies, and are tempted to doubt the power of God to bring new things to birth in the life of His Church. But when we yield ourselves to the Spirit which moved the Apostle Paul, we can repeat with new significance his prayer "Now unto Him Who is able to do exceeding abundantly, above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, to Him be the glory in the *Church*" (this rapidly expanding Church all over the world), "and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen."