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Ecumenicity on the North American Continent: An Editorial

THE World Council of Churches, organized in 1948, and the world conferences of Christian leaders which led up to its formation, have created among Protestants a consciousness of the larger Church to which they belong, and have made them more eager for fellowship with denominations beyond their own. Those who participate in ecumenical discussions discover very quickly that the problems with which they have been wrestling for years in their own church are almost identical with those being faced by leaders in other churches, and that, in spite of wide differences in tradition, doctrine and ways of worship, each church has much that it can learn from the others. Merely to hear our problems stated in the larger setting helps us to see them in a new perspective and we draw encouragement from the knowledge that others, more competent than we are, have long been at work in the areas that concern us. For any Protestant Church to-day to remain indifferent to what is happening in other churches and to live in isolation would seem to us to be self-defeating.

Yet it must be stated that our Canadian churches during the past century have to a large degree been isolated by a boundary line from other Protestant churches on this continent. Of course there have been Canadians who have crossed the line to become ministers and professors in American churches, but rarely have Canadian churches gone searching in the U.S.A. for men for special tasks, and one has a feeling that any such move might meet with resentment. A Scotsman who comes to Canada by way of the States does not count, for he is reckoned by Canadians to be a Scotsman and not an American even though his sojourn may have lasted thirty years. But more important is the fact that Canadian and American churches have paid very little attention to each other, and in general each has remained quite ignorant of the character, the history, and the theological developments taking place in the other.

There are a number of reasons for this isolation of Canadian churches from sister churches so close at hand. First, of course, has been the strength of the bonds of sentiment that have made us find our closest ties with churches in Britain. The filling of vacant pulpits and professorships from the old land and the yearly procession of graduate students to Edinburgh and Oxford have been the chief agencies in maintaining those bonds. But gradually the churches are realizing that the Atlantic Ocean is a very real impediment to any close fellowship with the churches of Britain, and that, without ceasing to value that traditional relation, it might be well to explore also the possibilities of fellowship with churches on the same continent with us. A second factor in our isolation has been a certain Canadian scorn for "things

American". One would not like to see that replaced by adulation, but only by an openness to whatever shows itself by its nature to be interesting or important. Perhaps there is also an element of fear, fear of being swallowed up, not so much geographically but culturally, by this monster neighbour. Already we are invaded through movies, radio, television and magazines to such a degree that Canadians have difficulty in maintaining any distinctive culture. The Canadian business economy is ever more closely interwoven with the American. Are we to become merely an appendage to the United States, we ask? It would be unfortunate, however, if this fear were allowed to keep us isolated from the American churches and from recognizing that our churches have a cultural, economic and political problem in common with them in which we may be of help to each other.

A professor in one of our Canadian universities raised a storm of protest a few years ago when he stated publicly that the Canadian business economy was steadily drawing away from the British and becoming integrated with the American. There were some people so angry that they wanted him discharged from his position. But the whole tempest died down when a number of prominent business men asserted that the professor was merely stating the facts. Whether we like it or not, we are intimately involved with the United States in all aspects of life on this continent. Bad policies on foreign affairs in the U.S. government endanger our future as well as their own. Educational practices dominated by a humanist philosophy create problems for us in Canadian schools just as they do in American. There is no escape from the problems. No matter how often we remind ourselves that we are an independent nation and a member of the British commonwealth, we have to open our eyes each day upon a scene in which geography has linked us intimately with our American neighbour. That is our situation.

In that situation of involvement, we may react with fear and distaste, and accentuate our Canadian provinciality. Or we may take our place in the fellowship of Protestant churches on this continent in facing and thinking through the issues that concern us all.

There are some who see in a closer relationship with the American churches only a further means of Americanizing Canadian life. They have little faith in the spiritual vitality and integrity of their own church. In all healthy human relations there is a mutual influence unless one party to the relationship is a nonentity. The Canadian churches have a very real contribution to make to the American. It would be a brave, or foolhardy, man who would undertake to say what that contribution is. Its description would come with better grace from others than ourselves. But certainly it would stand in some relation to our greater emphasis upon basic biblical and theological studies in the training of the ministry. It is easier for us to describe the contribution the American churches can make to us: a sharper awareness of the problems of our time, perhaps because they are now in a more exposed world situation and under greater pressures; a greater determination and ingeniousness in seeking solutions; a willingness to experiment even

though it may be costly; an expertness in all matters that have to do with organization, a talent that sometimes results in inflated administration but more often in the thorough and effective implementation of a plan; an insistence upon long-range planning of the Church's work; and last, but not least, an increasing amount of vigorous and highly competent theological scholarship which should be a primary stimulus to theological thought in the Canadian churches.

American churches look with great friendliness toward Canada. They are ready to listen to anything of note that we may have to say to them even though it is critical and touches them at a tender spot. They are only too eager to put Canadians to work. And their scholars are invariably delighted to be invited to speak or lecture in Canada. If we in our Canadian churches could overcome our fears and suspicions and respond with a like openness and readiness to learn, there could be a much more intimate fellowship and constant interchange of life and thought between the churches on opposite sides of the border.