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'Discerning the Obedience of Faith'

A Short History of the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission

Part 1: 1968-1986

David Parker

KEYWORDS: *Theological education, evangelism, ecumenism, Lausanne movement, culture, social justice, scholarships,*

Background

THE ORIGINS¹ OF THE Theological Commission (TC) go back to May 1968 when the World Evangelical Fellow-

ship (now Alliance) (WEF) General Council met in Lausanne Switzerland. A key item of business was the resolution of differing views of the authority of Scripture, which opened the way for European evangelicals to join the movement. Appropriately, it was decided to appoint a Theological Commission to 'review and suggest necessary changes in the Confession of Faith for action at the next General Council'.²

At the same meeting, Bruce Nicholls, missionary from New Zealand, teaching since 1955 at Union

1 The sources for this history are mostly the official records of the WEF/A Theological Commission. Acknowledgement is made to Dr Bruce J. Nicholls and Mr John E. Langlois for their assistance; and to Dr Nicholls for his article, 'The History of the WEF Theological Commission 1969-1986', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Jan 2002 Vol 26 No 1, pp. 4-22. The help of various other WEF personnel is also acknowledged.

2 David Howard, *The Dream that would not Die: the birth and growth of the World Evangelical Fellowship 1846-1986* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), p. 158.

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Biblical Seminary in Yeotmal, India under BMMF (later Interserve) was invited by the WEF General Secretary, Dennis Clark (with whom he was acquainted through his work in the Indian subcontinent), to speak. Nicholls presented an impressive paper dealing with critical issues in the theological scene in Asia, such as the state of the unevangelised, inter-religious dialogue, the indigenisation of the gospel and the secularization of society. As a result, he was appointed Theological Coordinator for WEF. Up to this point, Commissions played only a nominal part in WEF work, but the Theological Commission would change that.³

Bruce Nicholls began work immediately by establishing a highly successful Theological Assistance Program (TAP), which took advantage of the resurgence in global evangelicalism taking place at the time. The purpose of TAP, he said, was 'to encourage the development of national theological commissions and societies and the development of regional associations, to offer them consultative help through lecture tours, seminars, workshops and consultations. TAP's function was also to strengthen [evangelical] theological education throughout the third world, with scholarships for graduate training of faculty and support for library development. During the next five years TAP became a catalyst in developing Theological Education by Extension (TEE) projects and accrediting associations in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and in Europe.'⁴

On the recommendation of Gilbert Kirby, Principal of London Bible College and former WEF General Secretary, John E. Langlois, a lawyer from the Channel Island of Guernsey who was completing his theological studies at London Bible College, was appointed as administrator and treasurer of TAP. According to Bruce Nicholls, John, who remained with the work until 1984, was 'God's gift to WEF'. It was a good partnership of a visionary leader and a meticulous administrator.

Publications were an important part of TAP's work. The first was the quarterly *Theological News* commenced in May 1969, produced by Nicholls and then assisted by Langlois.⁵ Another of the early publications was a quarterly entitled *Programming News*. This was initiated by Langlois to meet a need in the field of Theological Education by Extension (TEE). A great deal of work was being developed at that time in TEE, but not much of a practical nature was available in programming materials. Martin Dainton was the first editor, and a selection of articles was published in 1977 under the title *Introduction to Programming*. In 1976 this quarterly was expanded and renamed *Theological Education Today*. Patricia Harrison of Australia, who in 1974 became the third member of the TC staff in the position of Theological Education Secretary, became the editor.

Within the first year of TAP's life, several projects had been established or were in planning, including an infor-

³ Howard, *Dream*, p. 157.

⁴ Nicholls, 'The History of the WEF Theological Commission', p. 7.

⁵ *TN* continued to be published by John Langlois until 1985 when Jeremy Mudditt of Paternoster Press published it for the following four years on behalf of the TC.

mation service, staff consultative services, regional consultations, evangelical theological societies, consultations, research centres and numerous publications. Nicholls' vision for regional branches of TAP to be developed in all parts of the world came to fruition quickly in Asia.

At the Asia-South Pacific Congress on Evangelism held in Singapore 1968, the need for closer cooperation between evangelical theological institutions was strongly expressed. This led to Dr Saphir Athyal, Vice Principal of Union Biblical Seminary, Yeotmal, India, undertaking a tour of theological colleges in east Asia. As a result, a meeting of 51 evangelical leaders took place in Singapore 5-7 July, 1970, convened by Dr Athyal, representing the concerns of the Asia-South Pacific Congress on Evangelism and Bruce Nicholls, representing TAP. A commission of nine members was appointed and plans for an advanced centre for theological studies were laid. A further consultation was called for June 8-12, 1971 in Singapore to implement these decisions. At this meeting TAP-Asia was born, Dr Athyal was reappointed General Coordinator and regional and functional coordinators were appointed. Dr Bong Ro became the full time director, a position he held for the next 20 years. TAP-Asia voted to become a member body of TAP-International but maintained its autonomous nature. Three years later it changed its name to the Asia Theological Association.

During this time, there was extensive development in evangelical theological education in many parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America especially, with the formation of seminaries

and graduate schools and an increase in the level of training amongst faculty. TAP tracked these developments and offered assistance and encouragement wherever it could; it provided international links, especially through the personal endeavours of Nicholls himself and his colleagues, which were invaluable in the entire process. However, as time went on it became evident that regional associations wanted to retain their own identity while remaining loosely affiliated with the worldwide body.

Formation

By early 1970s, WEF, under the leadership of its International Secretary, Clyde Taylor, was working toward organizing itself better, especially using commissions to do so. A number of commissions had been proposed much earlier⁶ but they had not developed, and in any case, theology was not included!

With the success of the TAP under the dynamic leadership of Bruce Nicholls' fertile mind who, it was said, 'plans projects running into hundreds of thousands of dollars', it was clear that the official formation of a Theological Commission was the next step. Therefore, the WEF Executive Committee, which was working towards a more effective organization, voted at

6 Howard, *Dream*, p. 157—evangelism, missionary, literature and Christian action had been proposed at the time of the inception of WEF in 1951, while at the 1968 General Council, when Nicholls had been appointed Theological Coordinator, C. Stacey Woods had also been named Youth Coordinator.

Atlanta, Georgia, USA, on 2 July, 1973, to 'authorize the development of the following Commissions: Theology (TAP), Missions, and Communications'.⁷ Then at the Sixth General Assembly held at Chateau d'Oex, Switzerland, July 1974, Bruce Nicholls and John Langlois, reported on the progress of TAP since its inception in 1968. Reports were also given by theological associations in Asia (Dr Bong Ro), Africa (Dr Byang Kato), Latin America (Mr Peter Savage), Europe (Mr Daniel Herm), Australasia (Rev Neville Andersen), and North America (Dr Arthur Climenhaga). Dr John Stott addressed the assembly on the question of regional theological associations, suggesting that a fellowship of theologians should be encouraged nationally and regionally, and that theological education should be critically reconsidered.

Later in the meeting it was decided to establish 'the WEF Theological Association and that its principal programme shall be known as TAP (Theological Assistance Program)'. Those named to serve on the commission were Neville Andersen (Australia), Peter Beyerhaus (Germany), Klaus Bockmuehl (Switzerland), Arthur Climenhaga (USA), Zenas Gerig (Jamaica), Daniel Herm (Germany), Byang Kato (Africa), Gordon Landreth and John Stott (England), Philip Teng (Hong Kong), and Paul S. White (Reunion Islands). Bruce Nicholls and John Langlois continued in their staff roles.

London 1975

The first full meeting and theological consultation of the newly formed Theological Commission was held in London, 8-12 September, 1975, at the London Bible College. Papers were given on the themes of 'The Gospel and Culture', 'The Church and the Nation', 'Salvation and World Evangelization'; in addition there were numerous seminars on strategies and structures for theological education, research and publications, regional associations, and other related matters. The results of this consultation were published under the title *Defending and Confirming the Gospel* (edited by Bruce J. Nicholls, 1975).

During the meeting it was recommended that an international council for accreditation of theological schools should be formed. It was also decided that the name 'TAP' should be discontinued and its activities incorporated within the 'WEF Theological Commission'. The Commission was to be expanded to include between 20 and 30 members, with an executive committee to manage its affairs. Dr Byang Kato, General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar, was named chairman, but sadly, his promising work as a theologian, national leader and Theological Commission chairman was cut short by his accidental death in December 1975. He was replaced by Vice-Chairman, Dr Arthur Climenhaga of USA. The pattern was for the Executive, made up of 6 or 7 members representing all continents, to meet annually and the full Commission every three years. Bruce Nicholls credited these regular Executive meetings as crucial for the out-

7 Howard, *Dream*, p. 161

standing success of the TC in the years that followed.

Staff were invariably supported by missionary bodies or in some other way rather than being employed by the TC so that salaries were not an issue (although sometimes clerical staff were hired). In 1974, Bruce Nicholls moved from Yeotmal to New Delhi as the founding director of the Theological Research and Communication Institute (TRACI). From this base he continued the work of the TC until his retirement in 1986. During this period he was ably assisted by a succession of secretaries sponsored by BMMF, namely Miss Liz Brattle (Australia), David Muir and Lionel Holmes (UK). They also made valuable contributions in developing the publications of the TC. David Muir initiated a Research Information Bank for the use of theological schools and produced a 40 lesson programmed text book for teaching NT Greek.

Other key figures were the convenors of Study Units, who over the years voluntarily provided strategic and valuable contributions to the work of the TC. Their role was to organize and develop the study, consultation and publication program of their particular unit, which included recruiting members of the group and could include fund raising.

One of the most important functions that Nicholls envisaged for the TC was to undergird the entire mission of WEF by providing a means of developing a sound theological basis for its various activities. This was a particularly vital role since the WEF was by its calling a biblically based movement and committed to the confirmation and defence of the gospel. This view of the TC's critical role was shared by others in the

WEF leadership. This meant that the TC was the most important of the Commissions, and Nicholls was intent on ensuring that it fulfilled this role. So he was constantly looking for ways to advance its work, especially establishing consultations or task forces to examine the theology of such fundamental activities as mission, relief and development and evangelisation, and to clarify WEF thinking on particular issues and problems.

For Nicholls, the TC had five main ministries: theological research and reflection, strengthening projects in excellence in theological education, funding and providing the staff for the semi-autonomous International Council of Accrediting Agencies (when it was formed in 1980) and its members, offering consultative services worldwide through the travel of staff and members of the Commission, and sponsoring consultations and a publications programme.

He was particularly concerned to avoid duplication of work and resources, so cooperation with other bodies already engaged in similar theological work was a high priority. Through constant travel, correspondence and other means of contact, he developed over the years an intimate knowledge of people and organizations around the world, and drew them into the TC circle, either on a long term or an ad hoc basis. In particular, he focused on regional theological associations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and other WEF constituents.

He also actively sought to work with global evangelical bodies, especially the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE). There was good cooperation at the level of the

LCWE Theology Working Group (TWG) whose convenor was Dr John Stott; six of its ten members were also WEF TC members. Consequently, the TC was actively involved in the Gospel and Culture conference, (Bermuda, 1978) sponsored by LCWE; the TC and TWG co-sponsored a number of consultations in the 1980s.

The TC believed that this policy of cooperation also included 'theological conversations with organisations with whom we do not have an agreed theological basis or goals, for the purpose of securing information, overcoming unnecessary misunderstandings, for better self-understanding ...'. This meant that contacts with the ecumenical movement, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches were on the agenda, but this was often seen as controversial by some of the WEF constituency. Byang Kato and Bruce Nicholls took an active part as observers at the World Council of Churches General Assembly in Nairobi in 1975 and Nicholls attended several other WCC consultations.

Nicholls and the Executive were motivated by the view that the TC had a key role, serving the needs of WEF and the broader evangelical constituency by helping develop a sound theological undergirding. But they also saw that it had another role—a prophetic one, calling on evangelicals to develop their thinking and to grow in faith and understanding to meet the challenges of the day.

Consultations

These twin roles of service and prophetic leadership were fulfilled through a range of activities, although

in line with the architectural dictum of 'form follows function', the TC structures were kept small and flexible. Perhaps the most obvious of the TC activities was the series of consultations, commencing with the initial 1975 London gathering. In some cases the consultations were jointly sponsored with other groups, especially the Lausanne movement, and in other cases, they were conducted in the name of WEF generally rather than just the TC itself.

'Church and Nationhood'

The second consultation was held in September 1976, on 'Church and Nationhood' at St Chrischona Seminary, near Basel, Switzerland, involving thirty theologians who issued 'The Basel Letter'. This message summarizing the consultation's thinking on the biblical relationship of the church and the nation in the world was circulated widely through WEF channels and elsewhere. The consultation papers were edited by Lionel Holmes and published by the TC as *Church and Nationhood* (1978).

As the Theological Commission developed, more consultations were planned and organized, and these had an increasing impact on the evangelical church as a whole. The year 1980 was the most prolific with six consultations held together in March at High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, near London. Two of these were jointly sponsored with the LCWE Theological and Education group.

Hoddesdon, 1980

The first was a gathering of Relief and Development agencies and Third

World receiving agencies under the leadership of the Theological Commission's Study unit on Ethics and Society and its convenor Ronald Sider working on 'The Theology of Development in the 1980's'. Then there was 'An International Consultation on Simple Lifestyle', co-sponsored by Lausanne and the TC unit on Ethics and Society. The Study Unit on Theological Education led by Patricia Harrison convened a study of 'The Teaching of Missions in Theological and Church Education'. Bishop David Gitari and Dr. Pablo Perez with their Study Unit on Pastoral Ministry focused on the topic 'Preparing Churches for Responsible Witness Under Totalitarian Powers'. Similarly, 'Reaching Muslims' was a topic for another section, led by Bruce Nicholls and Frank Khair Ullah and co-sponsored with LCWE.

Dr Paul Bowers headed up a conference on the accreditation of theological education. At this time, there were five regional theological associations in different parts of the world involved in accreditation of theological schools and generally in the development of their activities. These five agencies met under Bowers' leadership and formed The International Council of Accrediting Agencies (ICAA, known since 1996 as ICETE) operating with 'internal autonomy under sponsorship of the Theological Commission'.⁸ Under the leadership of Dr Paul Bowers, missionary of SIM International in Kenya, who was appointed General Secretary, the ICAA provided a medium of contact for theological educators worldwide, and

promoted the improvement of theological education through accreditation, sharing of ideas, resources and fellowship. The creation of ICAA fulfilled an early aim of the TC, and it was the agency through which its interests in theological education were channelled until the mid-nineties when it developed into an autonomous body within the WEF family.

One of the most significant of these gatherings was the second, the International Consultation on Simple Lifestyle, which drew together 85 evangelical leaders from 27 countries. Out of this consultation, which was responding to the 1974 Lausanne Covenant's call to 'develop a simple life-style', came the most complete and biblically grounded statements which have ever appeared in evangelical circles on the topic. The thorough and provocative papers presented at this consultation were edited by Dr Ronald Sider and published by Paternoster under the title *Lifestyle in the Eighties: An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle*.

Similarly, the consultation on development dealt vigorously with the theological implications for evangelicals of the problems of development in the modern world and published its results in *Evangelicals and Development: Towards a Theology of Social Change*, edited also by Ronald Sider. A key focus of the conference was the realization that much evangelical response to poverty had been pragmatic rather than based on a biblical understanding of the kingdom of God. It also agreed that the goal of Christian involvement in Development should be not only the provision of basic human needs but also social change which secures just relationships in societies. Major

⁸ ICAA Constitution quoted in Howard, *Dream*, p. 163.

papers were presented, inter alia, by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden of India, who would figure strongly in the future of the TC.

The full Theological Commission also met during this period of consultations, 21–24 March, as did the WEF itself in its seventh General Assembly. The WEF Executive approved the appointment of 47 members for the TC. The TC also recommended to WEF that the LCWE Theology and Education group and the TC form an international theological commission, but this proposal did not eventuate. During the General Assembly, the unexpected reaction of some WEF members to the presence of official observers from the Vatican on the programme led to one of the TC's most enduring yet controversial projects.⁹ This was the Task Force on Roman Catholicism (later becoming the Study Unit on Ecumenical Issues), which was appointed in October 1980, initially under the leadership of Dr Pablo Perez of Mexico. It began meeting from 1984.

CRESR 1982

A significant outcome of the 1980 TC meeting was the announcement that a study programme would be initiated on evangelism and social responsibility, co-sponsored by the Lausanne Theology and Education Group and the Theological Commission of WEF. Small groups in different cultural situations were established and the process culminated in an international consultation which was held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, 16–23 June, 1982,

known as the Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (CRESR).

Fifty evangelical leaders from 27 countries met in what was regarded as 'the most ambitious consultation on that topic yet attempted in the evangelical world'. Plans were made to 'allow for legitimate differences of opinion and understanding of the teachings of the Bible in this critical realm' and 'participants represented a broad spectrum of theological perspectives'. As a result, 'New ground was broken and great strides were taken towards defining an evangelical consensus in the area of social responsibility'.

The final statement of the consultation appeared in 1982 as the Grand Rapids Report, *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: an Evangelical Commitment*, edited by John Stott. This was undoubtedly the most comprehensive statement on this topic ever produced by evangelicals. The papers were published in 1985 entitled *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility*, edited by Bruce Nicholls.

CRESR was another highly significant consultation whose findings would continue to be an important influence on evangelicalism in the following years. Yet by the time it was underway, the TC and other sections of the WEF family were already strongly focusing on another crucial consultation, to be known as Wheaton '83, which would also prove to be a major climax and turning point, especially for the TC and its founder.

Third World Theologians

At the same time, there were other

9 Howard, *Dream*, pp. 133-5.

gatherings in process which would have significance for themselves, as well for the TC and those it was serving. The first of these was a meeting of evangelical missions theologians in Thailand, 22-25 March, 1982 which considered non-Christian world views and various Christologies arising from the poor and the oppressed to find effective and faithful ways of proclaiming Christ. This group which soon developed into a powerful organization known as The International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT) linked with the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, met again in Mexico two years later to discuss the theology of the Holy Spirit.

The other was a meeting of Third World theologians held in Korea 27 Aug-5 Sept, 1982, co-sponsored by the TC and regional theological associations on the theme of 'Theology and the Bible in Context'. This arose out of contacts made at the 1980 TC meetings and reinforced later at the LCWE consultation held at Pattaya, Thailand. A 1700 word statement, 'The Seoul Declaration'¹⁰ expressed the outcome of the meeting in developing theologies suited to third-world situations.

These two conferences indicated the growing strength of third-world theologians which was one of the goals of the TC. *Evangelical Review of Theology* commented, 'The papers in this number mark an historic moment in the development of third world theological reflection. The degree of unity achieved in the midst of incredible

diversity and tensions of cultures, mission and ecclesiological heritages, economic and political systems is remarkable. It reflects a common determination to uphold the primacy and authority of Scripture and devotion and obedience to one Saviour and Lord. We may find fault with the wording of the Seoul Declaration, but its central thrust is clear and augers well for the theological undergirding of the churches which will embrace three-fifths of the world's Christians by the 21st century.'

Task Forces, Study Units and Publications

A second major strand in the work of the TC was the system of Study Units and Task Forces which was developed to focus in detail on various topics of concern and importance. Starting from the consultation held at St Chrischona in 1976, the programme was put in place with six 'Study and Encounter Units' (as they were first called) under Lionel Holmes as Project Secretary. They covered the fields of Faith and Church, Theology and Culture, Ethics and Society, Pastoral Care, Theological Education and also Mission and Evangelism (which was conducted in cooperation with the LCWE Theology and Education Group). A budget of \$20,000 was raised, and each member of the Commission was assigned to one of these groups which would be the primary avenue for TC activity. The number, focus and effectiveness of the Units varied over the years, with Faith and Church, Ethics and Society and Theological Education being particularly active.

¹⁰ Published in *ERT* Vol 7 No 1, Apr. 1983, along with other papers.

Both the consultation and study unit programmes contributed to the publication activity of the TC in the form of books containing papers from the consultations and specially compiled volumes reporting on the work of the task forces.

There was an ambitious plan in 1979 to produce a series of textbooks covering the entire range of systematic theology. Each volume would emphasize the biblical foundations, historical developments and interpretation for contemporary cultural situations, using teams of cross-cultural theologians in the preparation of the series. However, this did not eventuate.

The closest project to it was the series developed by the Faith and Church Study Unit. Consultations were held at Cambridge where the paper writers drawn from all over the world discussed their prepared manuscripts in an intensive session of a few days, after which the work was revised and edited. The project leadership was initiated by Dr Ulrich Betz, and the coordination by Dr Richard France, but Dr Donald A. Carson took over at an early point and edited all five volumes in the series. The first of the books was *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, which appeared in 1984. It was followed by *Church in The Bible and the World* in 1987.

In 1978 a special series of small booklets was initiated, edited by Klaus Bockmuehl under the title, 'Outreach and Identity' and published by Paternoster Press of England and InterVarsity Press, USA. Altogether six were produced until 1983, after which the

series lay dormant for a decade.¹¹ Bruce Nicholls' volume on contextualization proved to be highly popular, circulating very widely and still in demand more than twenty years later.

ERT & TN

The publication ministry was significantly advanced late in 1977 with the appearance of a journal, *Evangelical Review of Theology (ERT)*. The original inspiration for it came from John Stott's suggestion at the WEF Assembly in 1974 that a digest of international evangelical theology be published on a regular basis. Launched in October 1977, it contained full length original articles and reprints selected from other publications in six categories of theology and practice, aiming to provide readers with easy access to the best material available without the need to subscribe to a large number of titles themselves. The publication was well received, and was published at first twice yearly by the TC office in India with Bruce Nicholls as the editor. Later, publication (but not editorship) was transferred to Paternoster to improve the production reliability and quality, and in 1985 it became a quarterly. Theological News as an eight page quarterly also continued its valu-

11 They were No. 1 *Karl Barth's Theology of Mission*, Waldron Scott, 1978; No. 2 *The Biblical Doctrine of Regeneration*, Helmut Burkhardt, 1978; No. 3 *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture*, Bruce J. Nicholls, 1979; No. 4 *Evangelicals and Social Ethics*, Klaus Bockmuehl, 1979; No. 5 *Pornography: A Christian Critique*, John H. Court, 1980; No. 6 *Theology & the Third World Church*, J. Andrew Kirk, 1983

able role of sharing information from the TC, WEF generally and evangelical theological interests around the world.

Theological Education

The work of the TC in assisting the churches and especially through theological education on a personal level was developed most strongly by the lecture tours of TC staff and associates. From the earliest days, Bruce Nicholls, John Langlois and other staff were regularly travelling in various parts of the world.

Of all the activities of the TC, the most strategic and influential was its work in developing evangelical theological education globally because of the potential impact of well trained leaders for the church in the seminaries and colleges. The lecture tours fulfilled a useful role as seminaries, colleges and churches in different parts of the world were able to learn from the insights and experiences of others, and to gradually develop a more global perspective on their work.

Another practical step was the creation of a library development fund in 1977 to assist poorly resourced schools in the third world. By this scheme, a basic set of theological text and reference books in both English and French would be made available at reduced prices to colleges which needed them. This programme continued for many years in assisting schools until they were able to cope better by themselves. Other schemes, such as the Evangelical Literature Trust, sponsored by John Stott, were also active in a very strong way assisting individuals also with grants of books.

Many of the schools were not only

poorly resourced with libraries and buildings, but their faculty often possessed minimal academic qualifications. So an important companion scheme was developed to provide scholarship funds to assist faculty members in evangelical schools to gain higher degrees. The first steps were taken in 1979 with the idea of a \$100,000 fund to underwrite the scheme, administered through the New Delhi TC office. As a result of an anonymous grant, scholarships to six European, African and Asian scholars were immediately allocated.

The scheme was soon in regular operation. It continued for about for 15 years before difficulties in raising funds prevented it from continuing. By then, other means of funding higher degrees, especially the John Stott's Langham Trust Scholarship Fund and the scholarship programme of Overseas Council for Theological Education, were available.

A high proportion of TC investment was focused on theological education. This was especially noticeable in terms of the staff which included Patricia Harrison, Secretary for Theological Education, and Lois McKinney who replaced her on a pro-tem basis. Many of the publications, including *ERT*, were intended to assist theological educators, while the pages of *TN* were filled with news of developments from many parts of the world.

ICAA

Perhaps the most tangible and strategically important of all was the TC's sponsorship of The International Council of Accrediting Agencies (ICAA). Following its establishing in

1980, the ICAA was instrumental in encouraging and strengthening theological education through its conferences, publications and other activities. It eventually covered all continents through its eight member bodies. In September 1982, Dr Robert Youngblood, missionary of the Presbyterian Church of America and a TC staff member since 1979 based in Holland, was appointed General Secretary. He replaced Dr Bowers who had resigned due to the pressures of other duties. Dr Youngblood was reappointed for another three-year term in August 1985, and after his resignation in 1988, was succeeded by Dr Roger Kemp in 1989.

Climax of the first decade

By the time it was reaching its first decade, the record of the TC was good, its programme full, and its prospects promising, but 1983, with its busy round of activities, was to be a major turning point. TC membership had been increased to 54 members to provide greater global participation and the executive had also been enlarged.

The Study Unit Program was working well, with groups devoted to Faith and Church (Don Carson), Mission and Evangelism, (Patrick Sookhdeo), Ethics and Society (Ron Sider), Pastoral Care (David Gitari) and Theological Education (Robert Youngblood). There were Task Forces on Church and China (Jonathan Chao) and Roman Catholic Theology and Practice (Paul Schrottenboer). A new study unit had been formed on Ecumenical Issues to incorporate the work of the Task Force on Roman Catholicism. The Scholar-

ship programme was also working effectively. *ERT* had made a name for itself and was ready to be increased to quarterly publication in 1985.

Another significant publication was also being prepared for launching. The work of the Ethics and Society Study Unit, led by Ronald Sider, revealed the need for attention in the field of social ethics. Already, there had been some consultations and meetings on the topic, a textbook had been planned and assistance was being given to theological schools in acquiring library holdings in the field. Now, as a result especially of CRESR, it was decided that there was need for an 'international journal of Christian Social Ethics' from an evangelical perspective. The first issue appeared in January 1984, with the title *Transformation* and it was edited jointly by Dr Tokunboh Adeyemo (chairman of the Executive Council of WEF) and from the TC Study Unit, Dr Ronald Sider, and Rev Vinay Samuel. The editors' aim was to present balanced perspectives on key social and ethical issues facing the church, raising issues, suggesting biblical solutions, and calling Christians to creative action. It was a success from the beginning, but because it was, as the International Director described it, 'creative, progressive and at the same time controversial',¹² it would later be a source of difficulty for the TC.

The ICAA had held its first consultation in 1981 in Malawi focusing on the 'renewal of theological education'. The work of that gathering, published in 1983 as its 'Manifesto on the

12 Howard, *Dream*, p. 171.

Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education' (revised in 1990 and again in 2002), proved to be a creative and effective guide for theological educators ever since. Further consultations were held in 1982 in Seoul, Korea, in 1983 at Wheaton, USA, and in 1984 at Katydata, Cyprus, where the topic was Theological Education by Extension, papers from which were published under the title: *Cyprus: TEE come of Age* (edited by Robert L. Youngblood).

The TC consultation programme was set to continue in May 1985 when it joined forces once again with the Theology Working Group of the Lausanne Committee to conduct a Consultation on the Holy Spirit and Evangelism, in Oslo, Norway. Its declaration appeared in *Theological News* and there were reports in *Evangelical Review of Theology*.¹³ Dr David Wells gave his understanding of the proceedings in *God the Evangelist: How the Holy Spirit Works in Bringing Men and Women to Faith*, published by Eerdmans and Paternoster in 1987.

Wheaton '83

The most important event of this period, however, was the complex of consultations known as 'Wheaton '83'. Planning began late in 1980 when the TC Executive Committee met at Amerongen, Holland October 24-27, 1980, and called for continuing in-depth study at local, national, and continental levels on four critical issues confronting evangelicals: The Understanding and Use of the Bible; The

Evangelization of the World's Poor; The Church's Response to Political Power and Religious Persecution; and The Role of Theological Education in the Renewal and Mission of the Church.

It was decided to conduct a study programme for each topic leading to a series of international consultations, with other commissions of the WEF invited to share in the process. While this process was initiated by the TC with Bruce Nicholls as the chief coordinator, other groups, including LCWE and World Vision, were also involved.

The consultation met at Wheaton College in June 1983 (hence 'Wheaton '83'), with the topic 'The Nature and Mission of the Church', bringing 370 men and women from 60 countries. There were three tracks—

I—'The Church in its Local Setting', chaired by Dr Pablo Perez of Mexico concentrated on how the church in its local setting is to fulfil its role as 'God's primary agent in his mission for the world'.

II—'The Church in New Frontiers in Missions'—was chaired by Patrick Sookhdeo of London and focused on how the church needs to cooperate, within itself and with parachurch agencies, in order to reach the unreached.

III—'The Church in Response to Human Need'—This track, under the leadership of Dr Tom Sine, had already been planning its own conference independently of WEF, but then saw the value of integrating with 'Wheaton 83'. It spoke with the conviction that 'Christ's followers... are called, in one way or another, not to conform to the values of society but to transform

13 *TN* Vol 17 No 3 Sept. 1985; *ERT* Oct 1985.

them.'—The word 'transformation' became the key word for what had previously been referred to as 'development'.

The results of 'Wheaton '83' were published in a 'Letter to the Churches', representing the consensus of participants' conclusions and in a series of books.

End of an era

This was a landmark event with a strong sense of partnership during the preparations and the conference itself. Well over half came from the Third World, and a joyous spirit of worship, prayer and celebration was evident. The use of case studies gave a strong sense of the importance, diversity and complexity of the church's worldwide nature and mission which impacted deeply on participants, who soon came to see that the local church was God's primary agent for mission in the world.

Of all the people impacted by Wheaton '83, none was more significant than the chief coordinator himself, Bruce Nicholls, who said it was 'the high point of my conference experience'. He was deeply affected by the emphasis of the conference on a closer relationship with the church and in the process, greater accountability of Christian leaders.

But it had more than theoretical significance for him—it touched him personally, with the result that he announced soon after that he would leave his theological work and spend the remaining years of his active ministry in pastoral work within the fellowship of the Church of North India. He gave the TC notice that he would conclude in his role with the organiza-

tion within three years, in 1986.

There were other changes too about this time. In 1983 John Langlois concluded his 14 years of highly significant and sacrificial participation by himself and his wife (although he was to continue his work more widely in the WEF as Honorary Treasurer and member of the WEF International Council, to which positions he was appointed in 1980 and which he still holds).

Paul Bowers also left the ICAA although he remained in contact as a consultant and has continued to be involved actively and behind the scenes up to the present. He was replaced as General Secretary ICAA by Robert Youngblood who had been TC Project Secretary. In a new development, Richard Hart of the Programme for Theological Education by Extension in Jordan was appointed in 1985 to foster interest in this aspect of theological education, indicating its growth and the importance ICAA placed in it. Patricia Harrison who had gone on study leave in 1981 announced her resignation, and concluded by 1983.

The Outreach and Identity series of monographs saw its last issue in 1983 with J. Andrew Kirk's *Theology and the Third World Church*. The series was to be replaced by volumes produced by the Study Units, but only the Church and Faith Unit ever contributed.

Another setback for the TC was the fate of the new journal from the Ethics and Society unit, *Transformation*. It was anticipated from the beginning that it could be controversial. As early as June 1985, it was the subject of debate at a meeting of the WEF Executive Council, which conceded that it was fulfilling a vital and necessary function. However, there was strong

disagreement over whether it should be associated with the WEF because of the organization's role in fostering unity amongst evangelicals and the potential difficulties of the WEF appearing to endorse views that might be expressed in the journal. Accordingly, it decided (although not unanimously) that 'in view of the nature and purpose of *Transformation*, we strongly recommend that the Theological Commission make arrangements for its continuing publication as an independent journal'.¹⁴

The next triennial meeting of the TC was planned for mid-1986 in association with a consultation and the 8th General Assembly of the WEF in Singapore. This would be Bruce Nicholls' last event as Executive Secretary, and it would also mark the end of the term of the current chair, Dr David Gitari.

In June 1985, the WEF Executive Committee finalised its quest for a replacement for Bruce Nicholls. The post would be filled by two non-westerners. Dr. Sunand Sumithra of India as Associate Executive Secretary from October 1985, and Dr. Tite Tienou from Upper Volta/Burkina Faso, who would become Executive Secretary from July 1986. Both positions would be full time.

Dr. Sumithra, a former engineer with a D.Theol. from the University of Tuebingen, Germany, had taught at the Union Biblical Seminary in Yeotmal and in Pune from 1972 to 1985. He also had pastoral experience as a minister of the Methodist Church in India. Dr. Tienou, a member of the TC since 1980, had been offered a staff position

earlier, upon completion of his PhD studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, sharing his time with the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM), but this did not eventuate. At the time of this announcement, he was teaching at Alliance Theological Seminary in Nyack NY.

The appointment of these two men was regarded as an indication of the growing confidence among evangelicals in the coordinating ministries of the Theological Commission at a global level. However, the arrangement would not be realized, and the stability of Bruce Nicholls' 18 year leadership of the TC would not be replicated, much to the detriment of the organization and its ministry.

Sunand Sumithra assisted Bruce Nicholls at the New Delhi office from October 1985, taking over from Dr. Robert Youngblood who now gave half his time as Assistant General Director of WEF (working under Dr David Howard), while continuing as ICAA General Secretary.

The main focus for the TC, in addition to its regular programme, was the preparation of the 1986 TC meeting and Consultation to be held at the National University of Singapore, 27 June to 2 July, 1986.

The theme chosen for the Consultation was 'Christ our Liberator and Redeemer', focusing on 'the basic issues of a theology of evangelism, peace and justice, the role of the Church in giving practical leadership in a world of escalating violence and death'. It would 'work towards a biblical and evangelical theology of liberation and redemption' and help participants to 'consider appropriate Christ-

14 Howard, *Dream*, p. 172.

ian practice and lifestyle for today's world'.¹⁵

It was intended, as *TN* reported, that 'the consultation will mark a new dimension in the evangelical understanding and give prophetic leadership to our churches in times of crisis'. In Bruce Nicholls' understanding, the TC sought to listen to its constituency, and also as a prophetic voice, aimed to lead them forward in the defence and the confirmation of the gospel.

Singapore 1986

During the meeting, plans for the future leadership of the TC took an unexpected turn when it was announced that there were 'practical difficulties' associated with Tienou taking up the post, and the offer to him had been withdrawn by the WEF Executive Council. Instead, Sumithra was appointed to the position, taking over immediately. He had gained some good experience of the work in the few months he had been Nicholls' assistant, especially in a trip to Europe in late 1985. Here, as he reported enthusiastically in *TN*, he had observed a session of the member TC Task Force led by Dr Paul G. Schrottenboer, visited the WEF European office in Holland, conferred with funding agencies, and lectured at several seminaries in Germany. He came away inspired and convinced about the value of international networking in theological work. 'We can never have sufficient exchange of information from Christians in different parts of the world; there is so much we can learn from one another. Here

the TC has an essential role to play as a bridge building, as a forum for dialogue, and as a service agency.' However, despite this vision, he was to remain in the position for only three years.

Meanwhile, Bruce Nicholls continued to live for several more years in New Delhi carrying out parish work with the Church of North India, before retiring with his wife, Kathleen, to his homeland of NZ in 1992. Through all this time, and up to the present, his vital interest and often his active involvement in the work of the TC has persisted.

Another disturbing development on the agenda of the Singapore meeting was the instruction of the WEF Executive Council concerning the journal, *Transformation*. After full discussion, the decision was taken to oppose the WEF Executive's wishes 'in the interests of the WEF's worldwide constituency's witness and integrity'. The meeting empowered the TC Executive Committee 'to clarify the issue' with the WEF leadership should it be necessary. Eventually, the WEF had its way, and *Transformation* was published by the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies from July 1988. It has continued to make a vital contribution as an evangelical witness in the wider ecumenical context. For the personnel of the Ethics and Society Study Unit, it marked the beginning of their movement away from the Theological Commission and the ultimate collapse of the Unit.

This 'robust discussion' in the business sessions was intensified by the topic of the consultation theme itself, 'Christ our Liberator and Redeemer'. Liberation theology was

15 *TN* Vol 18 No 1 Jan 1986.

still at that time a matter of controversy in evangelical circles, and the presence of a strong contingent from Latin America (where this movement had its origins) and sympathetic supporters ensured that the topic would be treated with fervour. Yet it was a topic that was chosen deliberately because of the seriousness of the world context and reflected the determination of the outgoing TC leadership to provide the 'prophetic' lead that they believed was an essential element of the TCs charter.

The papers tackled the relevant issues directly with contributions by Rodrigo Tano (Philippines) on Asian theology, Rene Padilla (Argentina) on the new ecclesiology in Latin America associated with the Base Communities, Valdir Steuernagel (Brazil) on hermeneutical issues, David Gitari (Africa), the Holy Spirit, all introduced by Bruce Nicholls' keynote address and response by Dr Peter Kuzmič.

Although these papers raised a host of questions in the minds of hearers, the small work groups that had been planned to flesh out the major principles developed in the papers and the preceding Bible studies were not able to meet due to pressure of other business. Planned publications never materialized, thus limiting the value of the real gains of the consultation, which covered ecclesiology, the challenge of liberation theologies to Evangelicals, and theological methodology, especially regarding the practical outworking of theology.

Another delicate matter was the presentation by Dr Paul Schrottenboer of the report on the Roman Catholic Church which had arisen from the previous General Assembly in 1980. The

report, prepared by a 17 member task force set up by the TC on the request of the WEF leadership, had been endorsed at the WEF General Assembly preceding the TC meeting, which therefore meant that the division within WEF circles over the matter was formally overcome. The report was also adopted by the TC meeting, and published in *Evangelical Review of Theology*,¹⁶ and in booklet form as *Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective*, P. G. Schrottenboer, (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

It was also recognized by the TC that there were many more issues that needed to be discussed, so it instructed the TC Executive to set up ways for this process to continue. Meanwhile, there was a development from another direction. When Roman Catholic authorities became aware of the report, they were not altogether impressed by its contents. Consequently, meetings were set up to try to resolve the differences, which eventually developed into a longer term series of conversations, expertly led until 1998 by Dr Schrottenboer, and after his death, by Dr George Vandervelde (Canada).

The 1986 TC meeting appointed Dr Peter Kuzmič as the new chairman to replace Bishop (now Dr) David Gitari whose term had expired. Kuzmič, who was to serve for ten years, was already a TC Executive Committee member, and the founder of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia. Later, in 1993, he took up a professorship at Gordon-Conwell Seminary,

16 *ERT* Vol 10 No 4 (1986) pp. 342–364; Vol 11 No 1 (1987) pp. 78–94.

USA. A native of Slovenia and a citizen of Croatia in former Yugoslavia, he was regarded as the foremost evangelical scholar in Eastern Europe and an authority on the subject of Christian response to Marxism and on Christian ministry in post-Communist contexts.

Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali (Pakistan), who had also served on the Executive, was appointed vice chairman. New members were Pastor R. Daidanso (Chad), Dr Donald Carson (USA) and Dr Rolf Hille (Germany). A new slate of members was also appointed, 41 in all were named at the meetings, leaving seven vacancies to be filled later.

Bruce Nicholls' achievement and legacy

As Bruce Nicholls concluded his official work with the TC after 18 years, he could look back upon a remarkable achievement. Reviewing the past, he said,

When I became the theological coordinator of the World Evangelical Fellowship following the Fifth General Assembly in Lausanne in 1968, little did I realise how important the era of the 70s and 80s would be for evangelical Christianity. In the 1960s there were few evangelical third world theologians and educators with post—graduate training in the theological disciplines, few institutions that trained beyond the undergraduate level, and quality theological reflection and writing was sparse. Now the situation has radically changed; no one person or movement can claim credit for it—

it is the work of God in response to the willingness for evangelical partnership. But I believe it would be fair to say that the WEF Theological Commission has had a major role as a catalyst in evangelical cooperation in the areas of theological reflection and training worldwide.¹⁷

The 1986 Consultation would be a culmination of this process for Nicholls, who had been awarded an honorary DD degree from Ashland Theological Seminary in 1982. The legacy that he passed on to his successors was a TC that had strongly developed its main ministries of theological research and reflection through consultations and publications, and strengthening evangelical theological education especially through accreditation, scholarships and lecture tours. As Dr Nicholls saw it, the TC had many roles but above all else, he said,

It provides an open space where theologians and educators can meet. It is a catalyst for new ideas and projects. Where necessary it coordinates projects on a global level and initiates new ones. The Commission is careful not to overshadow the work of national and regional bodies and is sensitive to their autonomy and self-image. The Commission was not born out of a desire to oppose other bodies, but to encourage and help evangelical theologians and educators to more effectively fulfil the programs and projects they have set for themselves.¹⁸

17 *TN* Vol 18 No 2 April-June 1986

18 *TN* Vol 17 No 4 Oct-Dec 1985.

Theological Education had been a prime part of the TC work, and would remain so for a few more years still. Bruce Nicholls could fairly claim:

We have been a catalyst and in some cases a pioneer in extension education, in developing accrediting associations, in library development, curriculum development and scholarships for faculty training. However, theological education is more than building institutions. It begins with good theology which is biblically grounded, contextually relevant and pastorally orientated. Theological education is more than teaching subjects; it is shaping men and women to know God and to go out to make him known in the world. Men and women need to be trained to be good counsellors, to have a missiological vision and to be accountable to their sponsors. There can be no dichotomy between theological conviction and ministerial formation. Spiritual formation is fundamental to theological excellence.¹⁹

Discerning the Obedience of Faith

At the conclusion of the Singapore consultation, he handed the work over to his former assistant, Dr Sumithra, who was faced with the task of taking the Theological Commission on to its next phase of development. Sumithra adopted as his goals the principles that had been 'masterfully summarised' earlier by the founder— 'the prophetic ministry of leading evangelicals around the world in current theological debate, and also a servant ministry to meet the needs of the churches, national fellowships, and evangelicals in general'.

In view of this twofold aim and the needs of the times, the new Executive Secretary announced that the TC had adopted as its motto, 'discerning the obedience of faith'. As he emphasized, 'Christian ministries of any type, anywhere in the world must start—not just with action or reflection—but with faith itself'.²⁰

(to be continued)

19 Nicholls, 'History', p. 21.

20 *TN* Vol 19 No 1-2 Jan-June 1987

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