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‘Discerning the Obedience of Faith’

A history of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance 2nd edition

David Parker

Introduction

This article contains part of the final two chapters of the second edition of the history of the WEA Theological Commission, ‘Discerning the Obedience of Faith’ published in 2014 to mark 40 years of activity by the Commission.¹ These chapters cover the ten year period since the first edition was issued. The text of the earlier part is unchanged. It was originally published in book form and also in the pages of this journal (2004, 28:2, 100-118; 2004, 28:3, 196-219, 2004, 28:4, 292-314). The remainder will be published in our next issue.

The updated version has been written by the original author, Dr David Parker, who is well placed to document the history of the organisation with which he has been closely associated since 1986. He was an active member of the TC, representing Aus-

tralia, and participated in several study groups and conferences, before taking on administrative and editorial roles. He was Administrator and then Executive Director until 2009, and has been editor of *Evangelical Review of Theology* for most of the time since 1998, having been called back to this role in 2010; he also edits *Theological News*.

The period covered by this extract involved many changes for the Theological Commission which continues its vital, although new, role within the World Evangelical Alliance, which is also undergoing a transformation as it comes under new leadership in 2015.

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Executive Chair, TC of WEA.*

Part 1 Reaching the Goal 2005-2009

I Renewed Hopes in 2005

With the TC now 30 years old, there was a quite different context from the time when it had been founded. There was a significant increase in the num-

1 A PDF version of the full text is available on-line without charge at <http://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/discerning-the-obedience-of-faith.html>

ber of well-resourced seminaries in the majority world, and many more people from these areas had received a high quality theological education.

This new context provided the TC with a greatly increased scope for networking theologians and theological institutions around the world, and the diversity that existed made the task all the more important. Although there were pressures on the TC itself, the decisions made at the 2004 annual meeting provided a good foundation for it to fulfil its vital role. Consequently there began a surge which continued for several years.

There were additional members and new study initiatives such as Ken Gnanakan's work on the environment and Brian Edgar's on bio-theology and public theology. Edgar had also taken responsibility for cooperation with ICETE on the theology of theological education project; the papers from this effort were published in *ERT* July 2005. David Hilborn had already begun working on a review of the WEA statement of faith in association with a similar project for the UK EA; he was also looking at attitudes to other faiths. Dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church were under the leadership of George Vandervelde, and there was hope that a similar move could be made with the Orthodox now that Per Pedersen who was working in Armenia was part of the group.

The TC's prospects were improved with a change of leadership in WEA. In February, 2005, Gary Edmonds resigned as Secretary-General after less than three years in the post. This opened up the possibility of a full scale review of WEA operations. Geoff Tunnicliffe was appointed acting leader

and a top level 'strategic summit' involving all arms of the WEA was held in May 2005 in Orlando Florida. The TC was represented at this event, where the first edition of this book was launched along with Ken Gnanakan's study on environmental stewardship. The plans for a new approach to WEA activity matured at this Orlando meeting. There was further progress in this direction at a meeting of international leaders held in December in Israel. This allowed the TC as with other commissions to plan more firmly and to work together more cooperatively in the overall mission of the WEA.

The core executive group was a key factor in the progress of the TC. However, the size and representation of this group was limited by the long-standing policy of the TC that members would be chosen on the basis of their suitability according to agreed criteria and were to be funded by the TC as needed, rather than being composed simply by those that had the opportunity and means to attend. Because of pressures on the TC budget, this meant that not all regions of the world could yet be represented. There was hope that some sympathetic groups might be interested to assist; FEET, for example, showed interest in helping to sponsor a member from Africa to enable that important area to be represented. Another scheme under consideration was a system of 'extended membership' which would see the possibility of individuals, and representatives of national TC and seminaries contributing their own involvement without putting additional pressure on the TC budget.

Meanwhile, a four-part plan for the annual meeting of the TC was being developed which would produce effective

results. Each annual session would feature the normal meeting in which the TC core members would transact their business, but in addition there would be other elements—a mini-consultation on a topic of global importance, a symposium on a topic of local importance, and finally, fellowship with local theologians and ministry in local churches where possible. Cooperation would always be sought with any theological association and seminaries in the host city.

II Seoul Korea 2005

This plan worked well for the annual gathering held in September 2005 in Seoul, South Korea, where TC member Dr Jae Sung Kim was a key leader in the Korea Evangelical Theological Society. This long standing and active group was instrumental in organising a successful consultation on ‘The Task of Evangelical Theology for the Church of the 21st Century’ at the Sungkyul University. TC members also visited a number of seminaries, not only in the capital but elsewhere in the country as well.

The business session was able to make considerable progress, updating the TC By-laws in the wake of the developments at WEA level, especially by instituting the new category of extended membership (later known as the Global Membership Scheme). This system would enable national and regional theological commissions, seminaries and individuals to be members of the TC and to be able to contribute to the work of organising by attending meetings at their own expense and to receive in return copies of the TC journal and newsletter and be connected

with other theologians on a regular basis. This scheme proved to be exceptionally beneficial in future years, but meanwhile the TC was looking at ways to fill gaps on its core membership, especially from Africa and Latin America.

Plans were also developed for new task forces to study Jewish evangelism and Integral Mission. There were also plans for new developments in ecumenical discussion, although there was still resistance in some WEA circles to the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church; these difficulties needed to be resolved before further progress could take place. A project which had been remitted to the TC some years earlier was finalised when it was decided that the revised EA UK statement of faith should be recommended to the WEA for adoption. Dr David Hilborn had been working with both the EA UK and the TC on this project.

Another important step was underway as well with news of the revival of the Lausanne Theology Working Group under the leadership of former TC member, Dr Chris Wright with the prospect of another global conference on evangelisation in view. The TC offered support for this development and anticipated opportunities for cooperation between the two groups.

III Theological Conferences

With these positive steps, it seemed that the plans that had been developing for some time might at last be within reach! The momentum continued into the next year.

Earlier hopes that the TC might be able conduct a significant event in conjunction with the 9th WCC Assembly at

Porto Alegre, Brazil in February 2006 (as it had done in Canberra, 1991) did not eventuate. However, the TC was represented by David Hilborn, along with WEA International Director, Geoff Tunnicliffe as official observers.

In August 2006, Carver Yu represented the TC at the biennial consultation of ICETE at Chiang Mai, Thailand where he was one of the featured speakers. At about the same time, Dr Rolf Hille was in Prague, Czech Republic, leading a group representing the WEA in the first session of discussions with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This event aimed at establishing points in common between the two groups and clarifying misunderstandings with a view to possible cooperation. A second round of talks was held a year later at Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA. The findings, released in a statement issued at the close of discussion, indicated that there could be much closer relationships between the two traditions, and also the possibility of Adventist membership in the Evangelical Alliances.

Meanwhile, honorary member of the TC, Thomas Oden, was developing his new Early African Christianity project which had arisen out of his Ancient Christian Commentary series and sought to give recognition to the significant part played by Christianity in this part of the world. This project was linked to TC and provided a backdrop for the annual meeting of September 2006, which was held for the first time ever in Africa. Some of the key early leaders of the TC had come from Africa but there had been no significant meeting of the organisation in that continent.

IV Kenya 2006

The venue was NEGST (now the School of Theology of Africa International University), an important seminary in Nairobi, Kenya and facilitated by James Nkansah-Obrempong, Professor of Theology at NEGST. It followed the new pattern with a consultation on 21 September on 'Religious Fundamentalism as a Global Issue'. Keynote speakers were Dr Yusufu Turaki (Nigeria/Kenya) and TC chair, Dr Rolf Hille.² This successful event was followed the next day by a symposium on African theology, covering topics such as Christology, hermeneutics and comparisons between Christian and Islamic approaches to Scripture. Each of these events attracted about 30 participants.

A pastoral statement issued from the fundamentalism consultation was widely distributed and well received, while the opportunity for local theological college students and faculty to attend the symposium was warmly appreciated. TC members met also with leaders of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and the Kenya Evangelical Alliance; some of them preached in local churches at the weekend.

In addition to these main events, there was a parallel workshop held elsewhere in the city on HIV/AIDS, led by Ken Gnanakan and Professor Danny McCain of Nigeria with the assistance of World Vision (Kenya). An action plan to assist churches was prepared and expectation of further developments in the future.³

² *TN* 35:4 (October 2006) 1, 2 (statement); the papers were published in *ERT* 37:2 (April 2007).

³ *TN* 36:2 (April 2007), 2.

During the business sessions a notable contribution was made by members of the extended membership scheme which had been launched at the beginning of the year. In particular, a proposal by Matt Cook (La Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de l'Alliance Chrétienne, FATAEC, in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire) arising out of his paper to the symposium for a task force on contextual exegesis was firmly adopted and was due to produce fruitful results in later years.

The growth of the TC was now positive enough for some long anticipated changes to take place in its leadership. Dr Hille indicated that after 20 years' involvement with the TC (half of them as Executive Chair), he was wanting to hand over the leadership to a new generation in the next year. Dr Ken Gnanakan also indicated that he was ready to do the same. Dr David Hilborn (EA UK) who had been anticipated to succeed Dr Hille regretfully announced that a change in his employment meant that it would not be possible for him to continue with the TC. Dr Hille was therefore reappointed as Executive Chairman but a firm decision was made to seek a replacement within the year. Dr David Parker's appointment as Director of Administration and Publication was extended by two years to July 2009 with the intention also of finding a replacement by then or sooner.

Dr George Vandervelde's appointment to the TC was also extended by two years so that he could continue to lead the ecumenical dialogue activities which were at a delicate stage with a decision about the publication of documents from the last round of talks with the Roman Catholic Church soon to be made. It was hoped that an understudy

for this important and critical ministry could be found.

Although there were still difficulties to be overcome, the historic session of the TC in Kenya concluded on a positive note.

V Theological Working Group and Other Conferences

In February 2007 some members of the TC, including David Parker, Michael Glerup and Matthew Cook, returned to Kenya for a consultation sponsored jointly by the TC and the revived Lausanne Theological Working Group and held at Limuru near Nairobi. This was an exploratory conference, meeting under the theme, 'Following Christ in a Broken World', to test the feasibility of a conducting a series of consultations to provide comprehensive and detailed theological input for the proposed third Lausanne conference on evangelisation. This event was expected to be held in 2010, to coordinate with the celebration of the centenary of the famous Edinburgh World Missionary Conference.

The Kenya conference was organised by Chris Wright and attracted about 30 participants. Papers were presented covering the wide range of topics. As a result of the discussion, it was decided that there should be three more conferences, one each year until the major Lausanne event. The initial papers were published in *ERT* October 2007, and the TWG arranged for 5000 extra copies to be printed for wide distribution amongst its own constituency and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the TC task forces and other study projects gathered pace. Ken Gnanakan continued work on the

HIV/AIDS project, while Matt Cook's contextual theology group made positive plans for production of their papers and the publication of a book. Similarly, a team of scholars with particular experience and background were preparing for the study on Jewish evangelism, with the organisational assistance of the evangelistic organisation, Jews for Jesus; this was seen as a necessary follow-up to the earlier Willowbank consultation.

There had been some progress on the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church which had been stalled due to resistance by some of the WEA constituency to such discussions. Following on submissions made by the TC from its 2006 meeting, the WEA IC had decided that the dialogue could be continued with the understanding that the papers were to be considered as study documents rather than official statements. The WEA participants were also to include evangelicals from Catholic dominated countries (but, in any case, these conditions were no problem as the TC had always adopted these policies in the past). The sudden death on 19 January 2007 of the TC convenor, Dr George Vandervelde, who had led the dialogue activity for many years, soon after these decisions were made created difficulties for their implementation, but Dr Rolf Hille was ready to take over and head up the process.

Concerted efforts were made to encourage theological commissions and associations in countries around the world to link themselves with the TC through the Extended Membership scheme, now in its second year. David Parker visited as many as he could on his travels and information, including

Guide Sheets on how to form and operate a Commission, was sent to many national EAs which had not yet formed a group. As a result, there was a steady increase in membership from national bodies as well as individuals and seminaries.

VI Philadelphia 2007

The major event for 2007 was the annual gathering which was held in Philadelphia, USA. On his return from Israel where the annual WEA leaders' meeting had been held, David Parker visited the area in December 2006 and confirmed the suitability of the area. With the assistance of Dr Chris Hall (Eastern University) and Dr Jae Sung Kim, now a pastor of a Korean church in the city, the program was developed.

The major component was a consultation on 31 July at Palmer Seminary where Dr Ronald Sider, a former leading member of the TC, was the well-known Professor of Theology, and president of Evangelicals for Social Action; he had also been recently appointed by the WEA to head its newly formed initiative on global civic engagement. Papers on the topic, 'Providence and Political Involvement' were presented by Dr Sider and Dr Claus Schwambach of Brazil; they were followed by a discussion period led by Dr Brian Edgar resulting in the drafting of a carefully worded 'Philadelphia Statement' on 'Evangelical Social Engagement'.

The symposium was held at Westminster Seminary focusing on 'Theology and Ministry' with addresses by Dr Peter Lillback, President of the seminary, and Dr Dennis Cheek from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

Previous planning came to a posi-

tive climax at the business sessions conducted during the gathering when several changes and additions were made to the membership and leadership of the TC. Dr Rolf Hille had led the TC in the dual role of Executive Chairman for most of the time since 1996 and was anxious to hand over to a younger person. Dr Brian Edgar, who had been the leader of the Australian Evangelical Alliance theology unit, had been seriously considering the suggestion that he should succeed Dr Hille. However, Dr Edgar had recently taken up a new academic post with Asbury Seminary, USA and was not sure if he would be able to do justice to the TC chairmanship in his new role. So he agreed to become Vice-Chairman with a view to taking on the position in October 2008 when it was hoped that a new leadership team would be finalised within the framework of a 5 year strategic plan.

Dr Hille retained the position of chairman and Dr David Parker was appointed Executive Director (part time) (cutting short his earlier appointment by a year—2009 back to 2008). At this meeting, Dr Ken Gnanakan (India) stepped down from the position of Vice-Chairman, ending more than 20 years of involvement with the TC. Dr David Hilborn, who had been head of Theology for the UK Evangelical Alliance for several years, stepped down in 2006 due to a change in his employment, and was replaced on the TC by Dr Justin Thacker, his successor in UK.

Dr James Nkansah who had played such a strong role in organising the 2006 annual gathering in Kenya was appointed a member of the TC, thus filling a long standing vacancy for African representation. Dr Chris Hall was

also appointed as a North American representative to replace the late Dr George Vandervelde.

Ideas were discussed to fill the remaining regional vacancies on the TC, but its work was strengthened by the active participation once again of several Extended Members representing national TCs and other bodies. It was hoped that soon Dr Edgar would feel able to take over the leadership role from Dr Hille and that a new full-time funded Executive Director could also be found. However, some of the discussions indicated that these plans might not work out smoothly.

For the first time, Geoff Tunncliffe, International Director of WEA, was present at a TC meeting and he presented a document in the process of finalisation detailing the relationships between the WEA and its Commissions. Clarification of these arrangements was well overdue, and the document generated vigorous discussion, especially when Dr Edgar pointed out the anomaly that it contained. Commissions were answerable to the WEA and existed to further its cause, but they received no funding from the WEA. Dr Edgar pointed out the contradiction of this, and compared it with the situation that existed in the national alliance in which he had worked where the commissions were fully funded by the parent body.

Funding had been a critical issue for the TC, especially in recent years, and it was disappointing that in the new era of the WEA, there would be no relief. In fact, the TC had found that even in its day to day management of finances, WEA rulings created difficulties and imposed extra unnecessary costs and delays. Despite this, there was no pos-

sibility of the WEA changing its policy on the funding of its commissions; the arrangements were cemented when the document was finalised later in the year. This decision set in train a sequence of events that was to have considerable significance for the TC.

The TC was present again for the WEA ILT held in Kenya in November 2007 where planning for the GA to be held late in 2008 was high on the agenda. Some WEA members also participated in the Global Christian Forum which followed. This new ecumenical gathering was meant to draw in the evangelical and pentecostal churches around the world in a way that the conciliar movement had not been able to do. The focus was on individual participation and the sharing of testimonies of faith.

After the success of TC gathering in Africa in 2006, it was planned to expand the TC's activities to another area of the world that had been neglected for so long—Latin America. Some of the early prominent leaders of TC had come from this area and developments there at the time had been a major focus of TC interest. However, as with Africa, it had not been possible in recent years to include this region in the TC's activities. This was all the more critical because of the rapid growth of evangelicalism in the region. A start had been made by the appointment of Dr Claus Schwambach of Brazil to the TC in 2004, and it was hoped that there could be the appointment of a Spanish speaking representative soon.

Accordingly, plans were being prepared for a meeting of the TC in the region in 2008, but the announcement by WEA that it would hold a GA in Thailand in 2008 meant those plans had to

be delayed. In any case, whenever the meeting could be held, a lot of work was needed to make up lost ground and to reconnect with the evangelical theological institutions there and their people.

Thanks to a generous gift from a Hong Kong donor, it became possible for David Parker as Executive Director to make an extensive tour of Latin America in April-May 2008. His visit, which was facilitated in Brazil by Dr Claus Schwambach, covered Chile, several areas of Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Guatemala. Valuable contacts were made, and many opportunities opened to lecture, preach and promote the work of the TC.

A particular feature of the visit was meeting with some of the 'old lions'⁴ of the TC who had made such a notable contribution in earlier times, including Rene Padilla (Argentina), Pedro Arana (Peru), and Emilio Nunez (Guatemala). There was also effective contact with AETAL (the association of Bible schools), Latin American Theological Fraternity and several other organisation, seminaries, universities. Inspections were made of sites that could be suitable for a consultation, ideas about a relevant program were ventilated and potential additional members of the TC were identified.

The reception was encouraging, but the need for definite action was reinforced when the most disconcerting question of all was asked, 'Why have we not had a visit from anyone in the TC before?'

4 For the reference to 'old lions' see Samuel Cueva, 'Missionary Theology in Context: Marks of Mission from CLADE V' (*ERT* 38:1 (Jan 2014), 54-69.

VII Lausanne Theological Working Group

The first of the three planned consultations on the Lausanne theme took place in February 2008 at Chiang Mai, Thailand with the topic, ‘The Whole Gospel’. About 30 theologians were present, many of them with connections to Langham organisation; David Parker and Justin Thacker represented the TC. The next consultation was held at Panama in January 2009 with Rolf Hille and Justin Thacker representing the TC where the theme was ‘The Whole Church’. The final gathering, focused on ‘The Whole World’, was in February 2010 at Beirut.⁵

The overall result of this intensive series of conferences was an impressive body of papers which would provide a comprehensive theological foundation for participants at the Cape Town 2010 event. Already many extra copies of *ERT* featuring the papers had been distributed globally and there were plans for a statement from the conferences to be circulated as well. There had also been other input from the conferences such as specific suggestions for the program; as head of the TWG, Dr Chris Wright also had direct input into the planning for the event.⁶ Chris Wright, who was one of

the major speakers at Cape Town, took the main responsibility for organising the TWG conferences but the TC was an active partner.

VIII Productive Program

The TC’s own program in 2008 was also a productive one, but difficulties were also encountered which had serious ramifications. The major event would be the annual gathering in Thailand and participation in the GA.

Earlier in the year preliminary meetings for the next round of dialogues with the RC Church were held 26 Feb 2008 in Rome. The Center for Early African Christianity developed its program with its first International Consultation in Ethiopia, 11-12 April 2008. Then in August the two task forces brought their work to a climax. The contextual exegesis group led by Matt Cook held a concentrated writing session at Wycliffe Hall Oxford to finalise papers ready for publication. At about the same time, the Uniqueness of Jesus and Jewish Evangelism group held its consultation at Woltersdorf near Berlin, preparing its papers and issuing a statement which was widely circulated.

In his travels in Asia, Europe and Africa, the Executive Director made good contact with national TCs, theological associations and seminaries. The Global Membership scheme continued to expand steadily.

⁵ Papers from the LTWG sessions appeared in *ERT* 33:1 (Jan 2009); 34:1 (Jan 2010); 34:3 (July 2010).

⁶ *TW* 38:4 (Oct 2009), p 3.