

COLLECTION OF MODELS OF COMMON CATECHETICAL PROGRAMMES

One of the priorities for the Sub-unit on Education coming from the Nairobi Assembly was to "help the churches by making available mutual information on concrete projects and models such as common catechetical programmes". This recommendation was reconfirmed by the 1976 Central Committee meeting: "to circulate curriculum models, especially on common catechetical programmes for Sunday and day schools".

In order to fulfil this mandate, the Sub-unit on Education has, for the past year, employed a half-time consultant to collect such models and prepare a comprehensive document for circulation among interested people as well as churches and councils.

In order to find concrete, living examples of such common catechetical programmes, we sent a letter and questionnaire to educational secretaries in all parts of the world, and to many other institutions and individuals who are engaged in this kind of development. The response has been good, and we have received quite a variety of cases from many parts of the world. A list of such programmes received to date is given in the Appendix to this document, and fuller details on this work will hopefully be available by the end of July for circulation as requested in our mandate.

What is a Common Catechetical Programme?

Catechetical Programmes.... Jesus was often called a "teacher", and the Greek word "katexein" (to inform, instruct) is used in the New Testament. We can trace the origin of catechetics back to the instruction given before and/or after baptism in the early churches. Gradually catechetics were developed through early Christian history, and at the time of the Reformation they were taken up as very important educational instruments, and were shaped into particular forms of "catechisms". The Reformers took it at first, then the Roman Catholics made their own catechism, and then the Orthodox followed the trend. Reflecting such a period in history, these catechisms were somehow aimed at emphasizing particular denominational understanding of faith, as well as teaching the basic truth of the Bible. The Bible and the denominational catechism were the only materials used in Sunday schools when they started at the end of the 18th century. In reaction to the abstract catechisms of recent centuries, efforts have been made to adapt method and content of Christian education to the modern secularized cultural background which it serves.

Common.... Another effort has been made to do away with the denominational barriers which cause separation among people and church. An early example of such "inter-denominational" catechetics is seen in England at the end of the last century. Today, a number of such "inter-denominational" programmes have been produced in many parts of the world.

Efforts at producing what we call "inter-confessional" programmes may be considered as more ecumenical and remarkable. These are the programmes which have been developed in cooperation between different confessional families, such as Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox churches. In our work, in response to the request from Nairobi, we have concentrated on collecting such "inter-confessional" catechetical programmes. Therefore, here in this report, "common catechetical programmes" is understood as "inter-confessional religious instruction".

Cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church

Vatican II understands that: "a discord among Christian churches openly contradicts the will of Christ, and provides a stumbling block to the world". (The Decree on Ecumenism). It goes on to say: "Before the whole world, let all Christians profess their faith in God. United in their efforts and with mutual respect let them bear witness to our common hope, which does not play us false". (The Decree on Education).

As we can see, it is not merely a coincidence that the WCC has taken further development of this field very seriously, and the Roman Catholic Church will hold its Synod of Bishops under the theme "Catechetics in our Time". When we are more open to see its ecumenical dimension and actual needs from the grassroots level, there might be further progress in this field all over the world.

Collaboration with other Faiths

The catechetical programme we have received from Ghana has a unique characteristic, since it includes Moslems as well as Protestants and Catholics. Based on the fact of religious pluralism in their society, this was developed to break through "sectarian" barriers and "to live in mutual respect and cooperation with one another as one people with one destiny", since "God's creative and loving activity in the universe" is clear. (quotes from the introduction of the syllabus).

A recent consultation with Moslems, prepared by the WCC Department on Dialogue with Peoples of other Faiths and Ideologies, has made an interesting suggestion about the field of education:

"Dialogue often begins as part of the daily experience in our communities", and three areas of encounter were discussed in particular: education, family life, and worship and prayer. For the area of education, they suggested: "text books for religious instruction should be prepared through consultation and cooperation between the two groups, and should contain no material unacceptable to either". (Planning meeting for Next Steps in Christian-Moslem Dialogue, October, 1976).

An agreed syllabus of Religious Instruction from Birmingham, England, is a more general one for religious education in county government schools, and "because of the pluralistic character of the city and of the world, the following world faiths present in Birmingham are also included: Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Buddhism." (Quotes from the Introduction of the Syllabus).

Significance of the Common Catechetical Programmes

After looking through the examples received, one thing that is found to be common among them is that they are produced within the awareness of the real needs of their own local situations. These curricula are the fruits resulting from the great efforts of people who are facing the real problems in their daily life, and yet are still strong in their hope and faith. They are the people who take the relationship between their own situation and the message of the Bible very seriously. As Section IV from Nairobi says: "We learn theology by reflecting on the total revelation of God and its relationship to our experiences in church, community and society."

Another interesting fact is that, although there has been no direct contact among these different groups, we can see that these programmes have been developed, almost coincidentally, in different parts of the world. When we are aware enough of the reality of our world and of our Christian responsibility today, then we cannot close our eyes to such ecumenical efforts. And if this is so, we can see these common catechetical programmes as prophetic living signs for the unity of the church, and also as answers from our generation to the growing younger generations.

We are not living in the time when catechetics emphasized the differences between denominations and confessional families, but are living in the time when common catechetical programmes show the actual form of possible church unity, so that they really serve for the world "in order to perfect the saints for a work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). The light of hope has been put in many places of the world - some small, some shining strongly. We should not put this light under a bushel, but put it on the stand so that it gives light to everyone in the house, "oikos"... and in oikoumene, the whole world.

It is our task, as St. Paul exhorts us, "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all humility and meekness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, careful to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the end of peace". (Eph. 4: 1.3)

Yushi Nomura
Geneva, June 1977