



**Reluctant Insiders:
Anglicans and Lutherans at
the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, 1910**

Maria Erling
merling@ltsg.edu

The 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh occurred during a unique moment at the beginning of the 20th century when Protestant churches around the world, especially in Britain and in North America, felt confident that their numbers, their message, and their organizational reach could transform the world. Missionary leaders in the British and North American world had strong connections to the political and economic establishment, lending credibility to their very vivid language about the

urgency of the hour, the opportunities for unprecedented advance, and the crisis in the world situation. Led by world class leaders within the major evangelical and mission movements, the World Missionary Conference promised to be an historic event for Protestantism, when it could respond to a unique world opportunity to carry forth Christ's gospel to all the corners of the earth.

Anglicans and Lutherans around the world, not least in their headquarters in Britain and in Germany, worried about the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910. They did not share the enthusiasm of the planners, and were not organized in such a way that they could be leaders at the event. Lutherans did not attend in great numbers for the simple reason that the language and the style of the conference was English, and few Lutherans from the Continent could speak it comfortably. American Lutherans may have helped here, but they were not leaders in the mission societies invited from Scandinavia and Germany. Anglicans came, but only after significant efforts were made to convince them. Internal opposition by high church Anglo-Catholics, especially in the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel [SPG] made it necessary for significant modifications in the scope of the conference deliberations. Anglicans insisted that theological and ecclesiological questions be left out of the proceedings. Any doctrinal matters that separated the churches would have to be left unaddressed. So practical matters came to the fore, and matters of faith and order had to wait.

Their posture of institutional reserve or the fact of their stark minority status does not mean that the aims or framework of the 1910 conference were not and are not important subjects for Anglican and Lutheran theologians today. For even if they were

not enthusiastic about the forms and methods of the 1910 conference, Lutherans especially could be understood as more envious than dismissive, while Anglicans expected that their minimal enthusiasm would not sideline their church. Their role as leaders in the existing conception of Christendom could only be enhanced in the future. Perhaps because they recognized that the historic conference would not force them into any relationship, neither the Anglicans nor the Lutherans offered a different or competing vision for the future of Christianity in the world. From their perspective the Northern, European, brand of Christianity that they had pioneered and perfected was the norm; other forms of Christian expression and experience fashioned by the free churches and missionary movements around the world would not materially or spiritually affect their conception of the faith, or more importantly, of the church. They were content, also at Edinburgh, to observe the world changing around them.

Evangelical Enthusiasm

Protestant missionary societies experienced their peak years of expansion and influence in the first decade of the century before the world war broke apart the dominance of Northern Europe on the world scene. At Edinburgh, these personal and institutional connections bore fruit. As chairman of the World Missionary Conference, John R. Mott's presence at the podium brought the Edinburgh meeting to order. He called on the speakers and he delivered on the powerful expectations of the participants. Before, and also at the end of the ten day conference, church leaders from every corner of the globe felt they had participated in a truly historic event, and that the whole of

Christendom, and especially the Protestant portion, had been summoned by God to study and act upon the needs of the world.

Participants felt they entered a different orbit when they came to Edinburgh because the focus of this conference was on the whole world, and not on just the separate parcels meted out one by one by some imperial hand, or divine mandate. The Edinburgh World Missionary Conference established a precedent – one in which the separate, denominational and parochial aims of mission societies would be subject to the gaze of mission experts. This was a new kind of democratic scrutiny, and it leveled the “praying field.”

The early 20th century was an era of banners proclaiming “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” A great evangelical leader of students, John Mott had spread the cause of mission widely in universities around the world, but at the more sober and scientific mission conference in Scotland he restrained himself. Everyone at Edinburgh in 1910 knew that the missionary conference had broken new ground in gathering not only enthusiastic individuals but representatives of churches and missionary societies who held responsible positions, and who could direct the policies of their institutions. Eight study commissions sought the perspectives of missionaries in the field, making the actual gathering in Edinburgh a time of somber and intense deliberation and study rather than a one time, inspirational event. Because the 1200 delegates from the 159 mission societies held positions of responsibility in their own organizations, they had perfected the skill enabling them to sit through the 300 seven minute speeches for twelve hours each of the ten days of the conference without flagging in their attention. Mott had

extraordinary skills as a convener and negotiator, and no doubt they were riveted by noting his skill at the podium. Participants relished the experience of watching a world-class leader at work.

Conferences that brought mission experts together had been held before, and international missionary organizations were practiced in study and consultation across national lines.¹ Experienced hands in planning these types of events also realized that if Edinburgh was going to be an international conference, it had to be planned by an international committee. International in those days meant Europe and North America, and mostly Britain. As a scientific conference for the study of mission, Edinburgh's *modus operandi* focused especially on deliberation among experts. They sought to solve remaining problems affecting mission through careful research and planning. The event in Scotland began as a project of the Northern British Isles, and broadened considerably when the planning moved south to London, and eventually brought in leaders even from the Anglo Catholic wing of the Anglican Church. There were a very few Lutherans, also, from the Continental churches. But largely it was a British and American Evangelical event, giving organizational form to the optimistic impulses circulating within the missionary movement. The planning committee for a World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh included six from the British Isles, and three each from North America and the Continent. Beginning in 1908, this small group decided on convening eight commissions that would each gather information on their topic, analyze this, prepare and publish their

¹ Two previous conferences had been held in London 1888 and New York 1900. See Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 18.

findings, and present a written report to delegates and a short oral summary at the meeting.

Anglican and Lutheran Reserve

Delegates to the Edinburgh meeting represented mission societies rather than churches, and this meant that representation was skewed towards the evangelical, Anglo Protestant world of the free churches. The sessions at the conference were to be held in the Assembly Hall of the United Free Church of Scotland. Delegates were assigned according to the annual income of the societies, making the larger and older established societies a commanding presence at the gathering. Churches and regions newer to mission work were consequently underrepresented. This affected American Lutherans in particular. Ecclesial orientations to mission within Continental and Scandinavian Lutheranism had created mission efforts within the established churches, and these were significantly underrepresented as well. Of the 1200 plus delegates, 1,000 of them came from Britain and North America, and another 27 from white colonies in South Africa and Australia. These theological and geographical limitations thus meant that the delegates did not represent the scope of mission efforts or even the diversity within the world's Protestant churches. Brian Stanley's excellent history of the Edinburgh meeting examined the list of delegates and showed that very few indigenous delegates from the mission churches were present at the meeting. There were not even 20 indigenous representatives from all the mission territories put together. Only one indigenous African was present, though not on the official registry. The voices representing Africa came

from white missionaries serving at African mission stations or churches. A few African American delegates were viewed as somehow representing Africa by enthusiastic visitors who imagined that the whole world was on parade at the great mission meeting. Mission societies had been encouraged to do more in this direction, but entirely on a voluntary basis.

Joseph H. Oldham, the hands-on planner of the meeting, and others attempted to create the broadest foundation for the Edinburgh meeting that they could provide. They found it necessary to begin their diplomacy when setting up the commissions and for deciding on the composition of the delegates for the meeting. By deciding on the geographical boundaries of 'Christendom' and excluding some mission work from consideration the scruples of high-church Anglicans had been honored. Thus the preliminary work in the eight study commissions and the selection of delegates to the official meeting were completed according to demands made by the Anglican Church leaders in hopes that their actual attendance could result. This compromise was especially painful especially because the assurance of Anglican participation was so long in coming.

The free-church and associational ethos of the conference was one reason that Anglican and Lutheran churches perceived the Edinburgh meeting with caution, even reluctance. The nature of the gathering – that it was to be composed of representatives from mission societies rather than from churches – made it difficult in particular for the archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, to attend the meeting. Joseph H. Oldham led the lobbying effort to secure the attendance of the Archbishop of Canterbury but did not succeed in this until the middle of April in 1910, only two months before the

delegates were to arrive in Scotland. Oldham had to do significant back room politicking with High Churchmen in the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to get them to attend; once this was accomplished the way was paved for Davidson to speak.²

Well before the agreement of Archbishop Davidson, planners arranging the work of Commission I with the mandate to study the task of “carrying the gospel to all the world,” had encountered stiff resistance from the Anglican representatives on the commission, who stated that the mandate as written would cause problems for high churchmen. The specific incident that sparked their protest was a statement by Julius Richter, a German mission representative, who had characterized Roman Catholics as ‘semi’ Christians in need of being evangelized. In fact, many of the mission societies in the Protestant world engaged in mission activities in precisely those areas where Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches were dominant. As a result, and in order to prevent the few Anglicans involved in the study process from leaving, the planners agreed to limit the focus of that commission to what was called ‘the non Christian’ world. Instead of a mandate to study the task of “carrying the gospel to all the world,” the commission now focused on “Carrying the Gospel to all the non-Christian World.” This significant decision meant that mission societies that sponsored work anywhere in the Americas could not be represented. It also meant that missionary societies working in the Mideast could not send official delegates. Strict Protestants complained about this limitation, but the participation of the official leaders of the Anglican Church was deemed important enough to make this conference truly a world-shaping event.

² These efforts are discussed in Stanley, pp. 68-70.

Anglo Catholics also insisted that as a condition of their involvement no matters of doctrine or church order would be discussed at the conference. This condition permitted the development of a kind of proto ecumenical spirit at the conference. Because the delegates decided to create a continuation committee at the end of their sessions at Edinburgh, issues that had not received attention at the conference were virtually guaranteed to receive careful study and deliberation later on. Since evangelical mission work in Catholic and Orthodox lands had been pulled from the forefront of the World Conference an important ecumenical principle of recognition and respect that advanced a more church-centered framework for later ecumenical developments emerged almost accidentally.

Lutheran participation at Edinburgh was minimal because of ecclesiological reservations, but even more so the case because of linguistic difficulties. Those Lutherans who were best equipped to handle the English language were American Lutherans, but Lutheran churches in the United States for the most part directed mission support through already existing Continental [German and Scandinavian] societies and were only getting started in developing their “own” fields. The Lutheran Churches around the world had not as yet developed any kind of federation or council that coordinated their work or provided recognition for the several Lutheran churches. International ties for Lutheran churches thus developed through cooperation in mission societies sometimes well in advance of church to church relationships. Typically, for instance, immigrants who founded Lutheran churches in the United States had strong connections to mission institutions and societies in their homelands. Many of the early pastors serving in the

frontier settlements of immigrant Lutheranism had been called into ministry through the 19th century revival and in this spirit had gained what training they could through revival sponsored mission institutes, rather than through university training as expected of priests and pastors in Scandinavia and Germany. Though Continental mission societies existed that could be characterized as specifically oriented towards the classical Lutheran confession, these were few in number, and not particularly entrepreneurial, or innovative. Thus the internal cohesiveness of Lutheranism was something experienced only vaguely, piously, or sentimentally, and certainly not at Edinburgh. Their national, theological, and liturgical differences were not yet even broached, much less resolved.

Lutheran churches in Scandinavia, North America, and the Continent were interested however in breaking out of their isolation. Emigration to North America created an arena where European Lutheran church leaders recognized that their own nationally based understanding of their church could not be realized. Other differences also emerged in the free church context that created strains even between Lutherans who spoke the same language. Meetings between bishops from the Church of Sweden and the Church of England in 1909, for instance, had provided a new avenue of influence for the Church of Sweden along churchly lines, but this was very coolly received by Swedish American Lutherans who were simultaneously defending their church work as an immigrant Lutheran Church from competition by Episcopalians who, on the basis of these very meetings in London, began recruiting in earnest among Swedish immigrants. Perhaps as a result of this tension, the Church of Sweden worked especially hard at this juncture in 1910 to maintaining ties with its immigrant ‘daughter’ church. The Church of

Sweden was helping the Augustana Synod celebrate its 50th anniversary in June, 1910, by sending its most internationally interested, and linguistically capable representative, the bishop of Visby, Knut Henning Gezelius von Scheele, to Rock Island. The absence of this significant voice from the Church of Sweden – he had strong ties with Confessional Lutheran leaders in Germany – considerably weakened the Lutheran witness at Edinburgh. It was also a loss for Edinburgh that the Church of Sweden’s immigrant daughter church, the Augustana Lutheran Synod, was prevented from sending a delegate. This church was perhaps the most ecumenically confident American Lutheran Church among the strong Midwestern American Lutherans.

Ecumenical Futures and the Student Movement

It is tempting to view the gathering from our own perspective alone, and notice mainly the blind spots, and point out what the participants themselves did not see about their own situation. It is thus obvious to us that a disabling, ‘white man’s burden’ missionary paternalism characterized the gathering. Voices that would have challenged the colonialist presumptions of the mission leaders were not there to be heard, and when the few Asian speakers did take to the floor, it was likely that any message they may have sent was hopelessly filtered by self confident assumptions of the many mission society delegates. The well known speech by the Indian Christian Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah asking for friendship has come to us as a tantalizing glimpse of what might have been realized more fully had we ourselves been listening. But speeches kept coming at the delegates, one after another. Mott’s leadership at the podium kept the plenary debates

focused on productive decisions rather than sentiment, however worthy. The leaders were not so interested in creating an inspirational meeting as they were in solving problems. The problems they saw did not center on sustaining and deepening cross cultural relationships or strengthening the dignity and leadership of indigenous peoples. What they saw as the problem and the opportunity in the world was a breakdown in the social and religious structures in a world that was rapidly developing. They observed changes in the world and thought they saw the aging decrepitude of outmoded religions. They sought, in the present crisis, to take advantage of the opportunity to bring the Christian message to unreached millions. Edinburgh was a missionary meeting of unprecedented scope and ambition, and not an incipient interfaith gathering.

The visionary nature of the gathering, however, was not in doubt for the delegates and visitors who attended. Things got started at Edinburgh that furthered specific impulses within the churches, and helped especially in promoting the development of young leaders for the churches. John Mott came to the meeting as the General Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation, which had been founded in Sweden in 1895. Thus the meeting in Edinburgh, through the reputation of its presiding officer, could be seen as shaped by a youthful and future-oriented mind, even though there were not many young adults in attendance. The decision to establish a continuation committee at the end of the conference, with Mott at its head, has also been credited with creating the structure for the development of an ecumenical movement. But that structure was already in place, and it had a larger scope than the one envisioned at Edinburgh.

Even though the focus of the Edinburgh meeting had been limited to mission in the 'non-Christian' world, to the exclusion of Orthodox, Eastern Christian, and Roman Catholic lands, Mott and others were hard at work on a wider stage. The limitations that the conference planners accepted in order to secure the participation of Anglicans did not materially affect the work of delegates to the conference, or divert its leaders and planners from agendas over which they had direct control. Characterizing the World Missionary Conference as an end point [culmination of missionary mindset] or a starting point [beginning of ecumenical movement] misses the more obvious design of the conference as part of an ongoing process of scientific study and planning. If this more routine aspect of the conference is highlighted, Mott's role at the platform guiding the conference should be seen in the context of his actual position within the missionary oriented World Student Christian Federation WSCF. Mott shaped and developed the Student Christian Movement and served as a key leader in the American YMCA. This gave him knowledge of conditions and attitudes among the rising generation of leaders throughout the Protestant world. He had intimate contact within Orthodox Churches as well, since the WSCF had been approached by these leaders to help develop their student work.

In 1911 the meeting of the Federation was to be held in Constantinople where Nathan Söderblom was among the important ecumenical figures who had been invited to speak. Profoundly aware of the opportunity to cross boundaries into this realm of the Christian world, Söderblom is known to have said before landing, "In a few minutes we will land on the shore of that Continent where Christ, Buddha and Mohammed have

worked.” And after getting off the boat, he placed his forehead on the soil. Söderblom’s address to the delegates was a version of his inaugural lecture at the University of Uppsala, and so we can imagine that he considered the delegates to the WSCF as an audience to be respected. It was entitled, “Does God Continue to Reveal Himself to Mankind?”³ It was an optimistic time in the Student Christian Movement.

Ruth Rouse, Mott’s partner who organized women students for the Federation, did much of the preparatory work for this important conference in Constantinople because Mott was quite preoccupied with work for the Edinburgh meeting. She made three trips to Constantinople, one just before the Edinburgh meeting in the spring of 1910, and then two more times afterwards to make more detailed arrangements. Rouse’s work with women students was a positive departure from the limitations of the Edinburgh meeting where few women were delegates, and fewer still were involved in the work of the study commissions. Afterwards, several Student Christian Unions were formed in Greece, Bulgaria, Rumania, Serbia, and Turkey. This kind of student work – developing student unions, study groups, and associations - was not a sideline to the urgent task commissioned by the worldwide missionary movement. It was a model, instead, that demonstrated the compelling force of the missionary vision that Mott had evinced in Edinburgh.

Students in universities around the world responded to the hands on recruitment efforts of Mott and his associates in the WSCF. Karl Fries, a Swedish churchman who

³ See Ruth Franzen, *Ruth Rouse Among Students: Global, Missiological and Ecumenical Perspectives*, Studia Missionalia Svecana CV (Uppsala, 2008), pp. 200-211, and Bengt Sunkler, *Nathan Söderblom: His Life and Work* (Uppsala, 1968), pp. 97-9.

had been also active in the international YMCA, helped organize the Federation in 1895. He, along with Rouse who came from an evangelical Anglican tradition, traveled upon request to university campuses from Russia to South America, and from Australia to Serbia. They followed the course of the heady opportunism of the Imperialist era, freely entering into the dynamic ideological contest between competing world visions. These two, an Anglican woman and a Lutheran churchman, fully exemplified the personal and transformative ideal that would shape a coming international Christianity. They were evangelists for a Protestant vision of the faith made up of dedicated individuals who would transform civilization.

Rouse and Fries were present at Edinburgh, but their work and Mott's work held to a vision that went well beyond the limitations of established church politics that had crimped the vision of the Missionary conference and dug the channel for establishment ecumenism. Believing that transformed individuals would be the leaders in this new vision wherever they were found, Rouse, for instance was highly critical of particular mission strategies that did not recognize the potential of indigenous leadership. She wrote to Mott, who was chairing the work of Commission I focused bearing the gospel to the non-Christian world, with two particular criticisms of the German scholar, Julius Richter, whose study was masterly and brilliant, but lacked sympathy for the native. He made too much of contrasts between black and white. While the best of missionary thinking had gone beyond such thinking, German missionary work tended "to hold back the native agency."⁴ Rouse insisted that Richter's submission get a 'strenuous revision' so that it

⁴ Ruth Franzen, p. 200.

could better reflect Mott's hopes for the conference in Edinburgh: that it would help the missionary movement to enlist the best leadership for the churches and for the spread of the gospel wherever they were found. Trapped in the language of native vs European, inferior and superior races, the older missionary conceptions and frameworks were also in need of transformation. At Edinburgh 1910 the post European world may not have been on display to the delegates, but the leaders understood it and had done work to make it possible.

Were we to look closer at impulses that would come out of the Edinburgh's meeting, we would see that initiatives were begun in many new areas of the world, by new actors, who would necessarily go through trials and failures, achieve success, and continue experimenting with many models. A singular strategy for mission, a tried and true method, did not emerge. The urgency of the hour stimulated increased enthusiasm for mission in the far corners. One example of the heady spirit of the immediate aftermath of the conference can be seen in American Lutheran responses to the Edinburgh meeting. Early in September of 1910, pastors from six different Lutheran synods attended a conference in Berwyn, Illinois. A report from the conference noted these delegates concluded that "it appeared clear that the religious, social and political conditions in Mohammedan lands are such now that a large door is opened for Lutheran missionary work in these countries."⁵ It was of singular interest to these delegates that the Edinburgh meeting had 'granted' the mission to the Kurds to the Lutherans [No official record of this exists]. But they also realized that their passion had not created any spark in official

⁵ *The Kurdistan Missionary*, vol. 1 (Chicago, October 1910,) p. 2.

Lutheran headquarters. No synod or church body was prepared to take up this work at this time.

These mission-inspired Lutheran pastors were not deterred by their church's hesitant response. Neither did they share the doctrinal reservations about other Lutherans that preoccupied Lutheran leaders in most of the American synods. Instead they resolved to create an inter-synodical missionary society, noting that "it has been proven more than once that such private efforts have accomplished a most blessed work," and that "if it be the will of God that we Lutherans should preach the Gospel to the Mohammedan world, then we ought to do it, even if the different Lutheran synods are not prepared to further the work from the beginning."⁶ They rehearsed reasons for their conviction that this was indeed the time to do the work and featured prominently the reason that "at the Missionary Congress in Edinburgh last summer this field was given to us Lutherans."⁷ They resolved to work with the Lutheran Church in Europe and follow the advice given at Edinburgh to begin the work at Saujbulak, about fifty miles from Urmia, as soon as workers and means would permit. Anyone who studies the history of Lutheran development in the United States and in Europe will recognize the unusual activist and optimistic tone taken by this decidedly American crew of mission leaders who made an end run around a number of firmly entrenched Lutheran obstacles. The Lutheran Orient Mission celebrated its centennial anniversary in October 2010. F. O. Fossum, the missionary who worked with the Kurds and also codified and recorded a Kurdish

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

grammar, has been recognized recently in a Kurdish documentary as a national hero for helping to develop the written Kurdish language.

Protest, a Cosmopolitan Identity, and Post colonial Inventions

Missionary initiatives like Lutheran work with Kurds may have occurred without the Edinburgh meeting in 1910, but the international meeting granted these free spirits q legitimacy that encouraged them to take initiative in spite of the negative signals, outright discouragements and warnings they received from their own churches. They noted that inter-synodical attempts had eventually been accepted as synodical mission so they forged ahead. They held it of tremendous significance that Lutherans had been “given” this work at an international congress of missionary workers. Several Lutherans were present at the congress – the missionaries in Kurdistan were also visitors there – apparently receiving this green light on behalf of the odd designation of the “Lutheran churches in Europe,” whichever they might have been, as well as the yet-fragmented American Lutheran Churches. Since this area of the world was not presently assigned to any mission society, there could be no official delegates with knowledge of the region at the conference. There were other areas of the globe similarly assigned to new missionary efforts, and there was confidence that if there was a united missionary effort in these areas the result would be a doubling of the efficiency of the missionary manpower already at work. Edinburgh 1910 was advocating a missionary surge.

The more sober and ultimately more influential international student Christian movement generated enthusiasm and serious study of mission in universities around the

world. Moreover, it generated leaders for churches and the ecumenical and missionary task through six decades of the 20th century. The federation's contributions to the ecumenical movement, therefore, needs to be noted here along side its early recognition of the problems of colonialism as well as its foundering on difficult tensions between an evangelical and pluralist approach to social problems. The student protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s brought to the fore the dissent and frustration about traditional methods of mission outreach and Christian understanding of the world's problems. During the 1970's the World Student Christian Federation adopted methods of discourse and action that eventually succumbed to the anti-institutional nihilism of the protest movements, and its leaders advocated the dismantling of the national Student Christian Movements. Similarly the youth movements organizing younger youth and non university youth within the churches that had been feeders to the university and campus Christian movements – like the Luther League, and the Epworth League - also dismantled their structures, making this effective model for ecumenical formation of students a thing of the past.⁸ For our purposes, however, we should note that in the decades that immediately followed the Edinburgh meeting, the World Christian Student Federation built important foundations and generated the capable leadership that the ecumenical movement would later need and would use for its own development. Churches need to cultivate leadership that is able to embrace interpret an increasingly interfaith, ecumenical, or pluralist future as part of its faithful response. A post colonial future for the churches and for our society needs leadership, too.

⁸ Risto Lehtonen, *Story of a Storm: The World Christian Student Federation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), passim.

Who writes about mission? Who writes about ecumenical and interfaith developments? Who comes to scholarly conferences and discusses post colonial issues? The participation of non-Western, non-Northern people has not changed as much as one might think must have been the case since 1910. I think the partial dismantling of the church's structures for leadership development is part of the reason for this. It takes work.