

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs

# *Pioneer, Architect and Mastermind: John Raleigh MOTT* (1865–1955)

“Plan as if there were no such thing as prayer. Pray as if there were no such thing as planning.”

(John Raleigh MOTT)



*John Raleigh MOTT was among the leading evangelists and missionaries in the history of Christianity. Furthermore, he was among the pioneers of the ecumenical movement in the world. In a sense, he even personifies the modern ecumenical movement, because in him converged uniquely the varied strands of which the ecumenical movement is woven.*

## **AWAKENING AND VOLUNTEERING**

There was a one-month long missionary awakening for students at *Mount Hermon*, Massachusetts, in 1886, which was led by Dwight L. MOODY. He solemnly declared: “All should go and go to all.” Another important keynote speaker in the meeting, William ASHMORE, delivered there the following grand

statement: “Show, if you can, why you should not obey the last command of Jesus Christ!”

But it was a third Biblical preacher and evangelist at that meeting, namely Charles Thomas STUDD, who finally converted John R. MOTT, a student at that time, and set him to his future direction, calling for “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” Soon, in

his local Student Christian Movement (SCM) at Cornell University, MOTT brought together the students from all denominations, including Roman Catholics, already by the 1880s.

After the high and impressive missionary fervour of that gathering, the *Student Volunteer Movement* (SVM) was formed, headed by John R. MOTT. He played a prominent role in it up until its gradual disappearance after World War I. As for facts and numbers, even now the SVM is considered to be among the greatest missionary movements since the Pentecost.

## **STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT**

John R. MOTT was the most significant youth leader of his age, since for him students were the lever by which he sought to move the world towards God. This was the area in which his most effective work for the Reign of God was done.

The *World Student Christian Federation* (WSCF) is considered to be the first ecumenical organisation of the world. Some even put the true beginning of the ecumenical movement in the year 1895, with the establishment of the Federation in *Vadstena*, Sweden. WSCF has also been an important organisation in the academic field, being the first international student organisation as well.

The founding Student Christian Movements (SCMs) were from North America (USA) and from Western and Northern Europe (Germany, Great Britain, Norway and Sweden). Since then, WSCF has served as a breeding ground, a training school, a halfway house, and a launching pad for future ecumenical leaders.

John R. MOTT served WSCF as general secretary from 1895, and as chairperson from 1920 to 1928; all his other



achievements have their roots in the concerns which WSCF has fostered. He wrote a considerable number of WSCF booklets on Bible study, prayer, spiritual growth, and even fund-raising.

He was instrumental in launching the oldest ecumenical review, *Student World*, in 1908; it has been a major forum for ecumenical creativity ever since. He even had energy to write the history of the first 25 years of WSCF.

His firm conviction was that Student Christian Movements (SCMs) in all countries should combine their forces to glorify Jesus Christ. The main ecumenical idea of WSCF was that the denominations would give their riches, not give them up; they would share their heritage, and not surrender it.

It was a student movement, of students, by students and for students. They dared ecumenical experiments undreamt of by the official churches, in the laboratories of the *student Christian conferences*, the warp and woof of Federation growth.

Each of these marked an ascent, an advance into some new area of the world or into some new region of thought; or the initiation of some new phase of policy or activity. They took the divisions of Christianity seriously and initiated ecumenical action to overcome them. Through all these, the participants learned new depths of the riches of God in Jesus Christ.

## MISSION AND EVANGELIZATION

Mission was his passion. In his understanding of mission, John R. MOTT believed in personal evangelism, as a means of enthroning Jesus Christ in individual, family, social and national life. He kept alive the holistic understanding of the Christian faith with the aid of fortuitous or unintentional ambiguities, which allowed each person to assign to it the interpretation she or he preferred.

He also managed to find the balance between the Social Gospel emphasis on the one hand, and fundamentalism or

premillennialism on the other, and he served as a mediator among these lines of thought.

The *Edinburgh* Missionary Conference in 1910 was the all-time high water mark in Western missionary enthusiasm, the zenith of optimism, pragmatism and futurism. It was an opportune, appropriate, critical, decisive and testing time (*kairos*) for Christian mission. As its chairperson, he sent more than six hundred personal letters all over the world, calling for unity in mission and mission in unity.

When the *International Missionary Council* (IMC) was finally established in 1921, MOTT was elected to be its first chairperson. As such, he called for an end to the distinction between sending and receiving churches. A highly important step towards dialogue on an equal footing took place already at the IMC *Jerusalem* Conference in 1928. He was also the chairperson of the IMC *Tambaram* Conference in 1938.

Irony and self-criticism were not alien to MOTT either. Together with others, he asked the sarcastic question: "Do we consider that we now have on the home field a type of Christianity, which should be propagated all over the world?" Step by step he managed to familiarise Christians with the great idea of looking steadily at the world as a whole, and of confronting this whole world as a unit by the Christian Church as a unit.

## WORLD TOURS AND CONFERENCES

His first trip to Europe was in 1891, to Amsterdam. But it is his world tour in 1895 and 1896, which can be considered to be the most fruitful ecumenical journey that anyone has ever undertaken since the days of Saint Paul. Among other places, in his first world tour in 1895 he visited Central Europe, Wien and Budapest, which led to the establishment of SCMs in the region (in Hungary, for example, in 1904).

Because *Latin America* (as an already Christian territory) was left out of the scope of *Edinburgh*, a tentative commit-

tee on cooperation in Latin America was established, with MOTT as its secretary. The first Congress on Christian Work in Latin America led to the constitution of the *Committee on Cooperation in Latin America* (CCLA), the foremost ecumenical pioneer on that continent.

"When, since the early Councils, has there come together a gathering representing so nearly the entire Christian Church?" he wrote about the *WSCF Constantinople* conference in 1911. After the meeting, he also found time to organise SCMs in Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.

Since this experience, he had insisted that the student and youth work of WSCF should be conducted in harmony with the principles of the Orthodox churches in predominantly Orthodox communities. His moral and spiritual authority was so great that in 1913, he, an American Methodist layperson, chaired the first conference on reunion amongst the different branches of the *Syrian Church* in India.

He first visited the *African* continent with a trip to South Africa in 1906. He organized and chaired a groundbreaking WSCF conference in *Atlanta* in 1914 on the role of African Americans in U.S. society, and on cordial relations of equality. It was the first meeting of its kind ever held in *North America*.

In *Asia* and the *Pacific*, the uniting force of the awakening ecumenical movement was MOTT. He set the movement in motion; its leaders were discovered and given confidence and training by him. The ecumenical movement in Asia and the Pacific started already in 1895, when he paid a visit to China.

In 1907, WSCF held its first Asiatic conference in Tokyo, Japan, and a second one in Beijing, China, in 1922. The first WSCF regional conference was held in Tjiteureup, Indonesia, in 1933. From October 1912 to May 1913, he held eighteen regional and three national conferences in Asia, in seven different countries, towards comity, cooperation and unity. He also organized mutual visits among the countries.

### Suggested Reading

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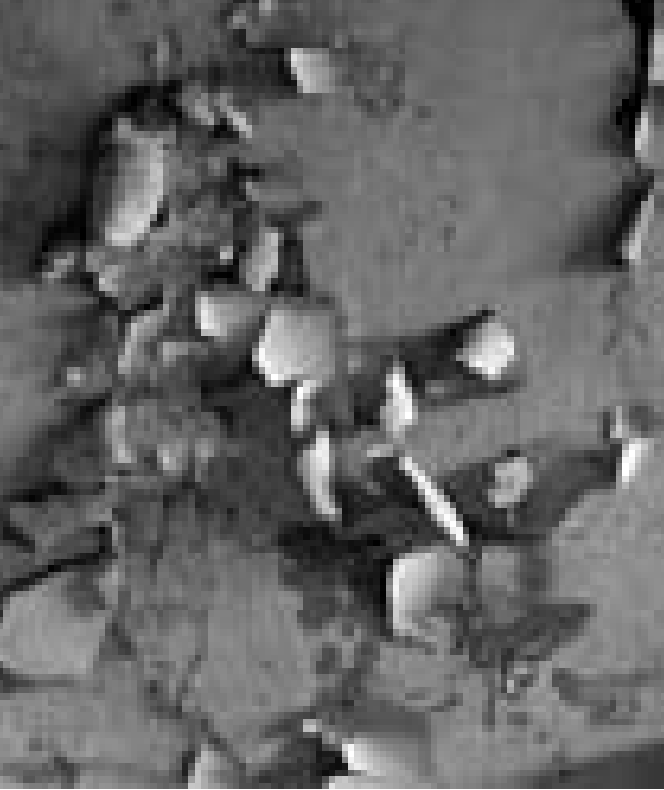
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He visited Aotearoa–New Zealand in 1926 and Australia in 1927, which resulted in the formation of the National Missionary Councils of these countries. These meetings were all precursors of the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC), and then of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).

The World YMCA specialized in relations with Orthodoxy, so they held three consultations with church leaders in Sofia in 1928, in Kephissia in 1930 and in Bucharest in 1933, under MOTT's leadership.

Following five so-called Muslim Conferences, he was instrumental in founding the Near East Christian Council (NECC) in 1927, the predecessor of the *Middle East Council of Churches* (MECC).

Many National Christian Councils are the fruits of his initiatives. He considered his greatest contribution to the missionary movement the enabling of the formation of these National Christian Councils, in order to strengthen the identity and independence of the new missionary-founded churches.

The *Oxford Conference of the Faith and Order movement* in 1937 aimed at clarifying and crystallizing Christian thought and strategy concerning the burning issues of human society. Its deliberations were guided by the chairperson, MOTT, who was also the director of the study programme.

The Provisional Committee of the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) in process of formation met in three different groups, during the long war

years: in Geneva under Marc BOEGNER; in Britain under Archbishop William TEMPLE; and in New York, under John R. MOTT, one of the presidents.

It was then more than natural that when the official body of the ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches (WCC), was finally established in Amsterdam in 1948, MOTT became its honorary president.

### **Discernment and Inspiration**

He was as tireless and as urgent as the Apostle Paul. He made extensive journeys around the globe, preaching in universities

and organising SCMs ceaselessly. As a prophetic but not theologically trained Methodist layperson, he became the architect and mastermind of many ecumenical endeavours.

He combined a dignified, commanding presence, a deep religious faith, an evangelistic zeal, a wide-ranging vision, courage, tact, an administrative ability, a power over public assemblies as a presiding officer, and a compelling, convincing speech.

He also succeeded in a masterful way in combining his faith in God's revelation in Jesus Christ with his faith in the marvellous providential achievements of modern science. In his understanding, all these serve as a handmaid to the sublime enterprise of extending and building up the Reign of God in the whole world.

He considered trade, industry, science and technology as God's way to create the providential *kairos* for the world to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. Prophetically, he considered the then-rising communism as the most dangerous adversary and even enemy of Christianity.

Especially during World War I he supported joint peace initiatives, such as those organized by the World Alliance for *Promoting International Friendship through the Churches*. He served on an official American mission which visited Russia in June 1917. Further, he was the chairperson of the Anglo-Saxon Emergency Committee of Cooperating Missions in 1918. As such, he visited

Germany in 1920 to allay resentment at charges against German missionaries.

He had a rare capacity to discern ability and promise in youth and to inspire it, with a sure instinct for first-class minds. He even had the rare power of enlisting outstanding personalities for the enterprises with which he was concerned. Let us mention just two remarkable examples here. First of all, he was the main influence on another Nobel Prize winner, Nathan SÖDERBLOM, to join the ecumenical movement, and later to establish the Life and Work movement.

Second, it was also John R. MOTT who discovered Hendrik KRAEMER, at that time the chairperson of the Dutch SCM, and commissioned him to write a study book in preparation for the Tambaram Conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in 1938. This book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, later became one of the crucial contributions to missiology; and KRAEMER became the first director of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute.

An incessant traveller, he was highly disciplined in the use he made of his travelling time. He read a lot and wrote voluminous reports on what he had seen and done. He was a prodigious and indefatigable worker, who always found time for an enormous amount of solid and diversified reading. He had an attitude of creative faith, of humility, of open-minded teachability, of receptiveness of new visions, of dissatisfaction with present achievements, and of Christ-like capacity for dialogue.

He had a rare balance of equipment, which made him at once an evangelist and an organiser; a person with the widest view of the world affairs and a master of careful detail. For his commitment to peace and reconciliation, and for all his life achievements, John R. MOTT was in 1946 awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

