

# 40 Days of Fitness

A daily devotional by Rev Garry Hardingham

## DAY 21 – The Church for Others

*Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.*  
1 Corinthians 1:10

The Second World War sent a shiver through the church. It opened up some deep theological divides forced upon it by the ruthlessness of rampant nationalism. Many felt that, just like the rise of nationalism in the form of Nation States led to brutal conflict, the rise of nationalistic churches threatened to tear the unity of the church to bits.

So was formed the World Council of Churches (WCC) in order to find commonality between all the different church groups that had flourished since the Reformation in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. When these people came together representing such diverse cultures and Christian traditions, what was obvious to them was centuries of isolation from each other meant that they had to explain who they were to each other. In trying to explain their strangeness to each other they were forced to ask the question “Who are we?”

In 1948, the first meeting of the Assembly simply heard a series of speakers that illustrated the depth of the church’s strangeness from each other. What was obvious was the separation between those Churches that emphasised the visibility of the church and the continuity of its visibility through their institutions over against those that emphasised their invisibility, their lack of visible continuity, and their dependence only on God’s gifts.

A Bishop of the Church of Ireland, Bishop Greg, in his speech, said that the church is to be understood in the terms of it being “*the body of Christ in history and we can know what that body is by looking at its historical continuity in its ministries, its sacraments, its creeds and its fellowship. If you want to know what the church is you look at the historical continuities that identify Christian communities, the order of their ministries, their sacrificial life, their creeds and the way they are pastored.*”

On the other end of the spectrum stood Karl Barth from the Swiss reformed tradition, who insisted that the basis of the church rested purely on the proclamation of the Word of God. Barth said that the church “*was not a given historical quantity, but occurs as a gift where the Spirit evokes faith in the hearing of the word. Any visible continuities must be seen as removed from institutional control.*”

So we had these two poles and this conversation continued to be emphasised in the ecclesiologies that developed over the next 20 years or so.

Finally, in 1967, the WCC put out a paper called, “*Missionary structure of the congregation- the church for others.*” This document maintains “*the church exists for the world. The church lives in order that the world might know its true being. It is the first fruit of the new creation, but its centre (the centre of the church) lies outside itself. Therefore the church must live eccentrically. This exocentric position of the church implies we must stop thinking from inside towards the outside.*” In this emphasis of the WCC we see a shift from the attempt of trying to understand the church in terms of itself, from observation within church structure, practice or belief, to understanding the church in terms of its mission to the world.

Basically put, the church does not exist for itself. It exists for its mission. So, it doesn’t matter if your church is highly sacramental like the Roman Catholic Church, or loosely strung together like the Brethren Church, what we recognise in each other is not simply a question of ministry, sacrament and pastoral care, but the way in which the church is related to the world. In this is true unity.

### PRAYER

Compassionate God,  
help us repair the harm that we have inflicted upon each other  
and the divisions we have created among your people.  
Just as Christ Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit  
onto the disciples to birth the community of the new creation,  
send your grace to heal our divisions  
and gift us with the unity for which Jesus prayed. Amen