

THE CHURCHES AND THE NATION

An Interview by Post on The Conference in Christchurch



VERY REV. J. LAWSON ROBINSON
Chairman of the National Council of Churches

A CONFERENCE of the New Zealand Churches is to take place in Christchurch from August 28th to September 4th. That is in itself not unusual. Most of the Churches have their annual gatherings. But this Conference has unusual features, which might mean something important.

For one thing, it is a Conference, not of one Church, but of delegates of eight. That is something unique, for it is the first time that they have come together for such a purpose.

And then this Conference is not meeting to consider matters concerning the internal affairs of the Churches. The 200 members of the Conference will have before them reports prepared beforehand by five commissions. One group will be considering a report on "The Presentation of the Gospel" under modern conditions. Another group will consider "Christian Order and Community" with particular reference to the South Pacific. A third will give its attention to "Christian Order in Relation to the Maori People." Another to "Christian Order in Relation to Land, Industry, and Commerce"; and the last to "Christian Order in Relation to Education." And after each group has hammered out its findings, they will have to run the gauntlet of the whole Conference in plenary session.

Since this Conference is so obviously something different in the religious life of New Zealand, *The Listener* decided to interview the organising secretary (the Rev. H. W. Newell). This we have done. But as we were not able to get within 200 miles of him, we interviewed him by post.

Here are our questions and his answers:

(1) What is the relationship between the Conference and the Campaign for Christian Order?

THIS, that they have both sprung from the National Council of

Churches. When the National Council was formed in 1941, the first big job it undertook was the Campaign for Christian Order, which lasted through 1942 and 1943. It had always been hoped that the Campaign would culminate in a great national Conference of the Churches. The unsettled state of things made that impossible then. However, preparations have been going on, and here are the plans realised, though it is the National Council itself which is doing this, and not the Campaign Executive.

(2) Is Church Union one of your goals?

YES, Church Union is one of the goals of the whole world movement, of which the National Council here is the New Zealand expression, though we would prefer to put it like this: "To examine the differences in order to bring out the underlying unity." For, in a true sense, the Church has always been, and can only be, one. It would not be the Church, if it were not one.

However, this is not one of the immediate objects of this Conference. Our aim is rather unity in facing our task as the Church in New Zealand. Clearly we can only face that task together. And doing things together will help to draw us together.

(3) In what respect is this Conference unique in the history of Christianity in New Zealand?

I HAVE tried to say something about that already. It is absurd to bandy about words like "unique" in mundane things, and folk who are absorbed in the preparations for a conference are always inclined to over-estimate its significance. But perhaps I can say something more of why we in the National Council think it is important.

You see, our National Council has sprung from, and is part of, a world movement within the Church, and it has had two expressions. It has aimed at unity in faith and order within the Church itself, and world conferences were held in Lausanne in 1927 and in Oxford in 1937, which made remarkable progress along that direction. It also aims

at unity in the life and work of the Church within the community in general. And the COPEC Conference in Birmingham in 1923 and in Oxford in 1937 dealt with this.

Merely to say that eight Christian communions in New Zealand are now together in the National Council is not in itself necessarily to claim much. Combinations of this kind are taking place all the time in many enterprises. What really matters is whether this Council, having been formed, is showing itself fruitful in useful directions.

That is the real reason why this Conference on Christian Order in Christchurch is interesting to us. For not only are these eight bodies coming together in council—that is something—but they are meeting to think about the "life and work" of the Church here in this land to which we belong. And the hope is that this thinking and conferring together may lead to common action. For we can't do much useful action unless we think and confer together first.

(4) What specifically do you hope to achieve

(a) at the Conference?

(b) as a long-term policy?

(a) So far as the Conference itself is concerned, we hope to issue a useful report on these five big questions, and other related matters, which may help to clarify the thinking on the part of the Churches.

We want also to remind the Churches that their message very directly concerns the stuff of daily life, and must be set forth in terms of the concrete situation facing us all.

Incidentally, we want the members of the various Churches to know each other better, and to build bridges of understanding and esteem which will be useful in all kinds of ways.

We would like also to remind our country that there are certain great principles of right within which alone our national life and policy can be healthy and strong; and we want to show how these principles work out in some of the situations which face us as a nation.



REV. H. W. NEWELL
Secretary of the National Council of Churches

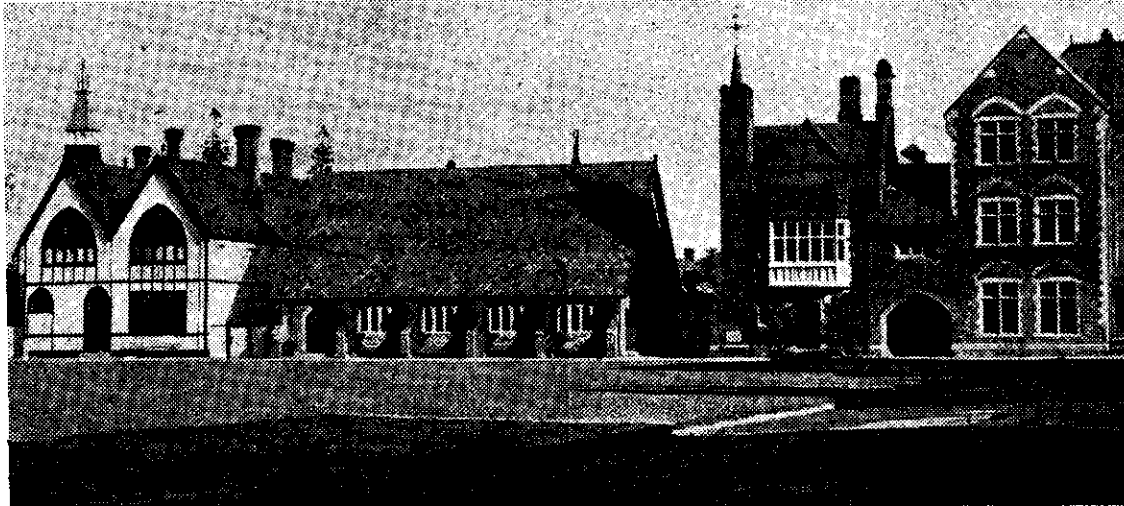
(b) Perhaps I have dealt with long-term matters in the answer already. But at the back of our thought there is always the purpose of the growth of the Church in unity in questions of faith and order, and in questions of life and work, and the "comprehension" of the Church and the nation in unity.

(5) If, as has been said, New Zealand has "got into the habit of thinking of Religion and the Church as something apart from the main stream of our national life," have you good reasons for supposing that you can break this habit? Would it not at least involve mixing politics with religion, and are you not therefore inviting opposition on the part of all those who are not active believers?

YES, I believe this habit can be broken, chiefly because it shows its own bankruptcy. It flies in the face of reality. From a broad point of view, religion can be defined as the dimension of *depth* in living. Hence, religion can never be separated from any part of life, for even the shallowest has some depth. The preoccupation of our country with material values shows signs of ending, and the solemnity of the times through which we have lived, and the huge issues that face us, all make people less content with superficial living and thinking. So there are good reasons for hoping that we can expect a closer link between religion and life, and between life and religion.

Whether that religion will be, or should be, the Christian Faith or something else, is a question which I take it you won't want me to enter upon here.

As for this matter of mixing politics with religion, opposition to this, I imagine, springs from a fear lest the Church should try to dominate the Government and its departments. So far as I know, no one in the National Council wants that. Indeed I believe they would oppose it as vigorously as



CHRIST'S COLLEGE, Christchurch, where the 200 delegates to the conference this week are staying