The Legacy of Norman Goodall

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Norman Goodall was one of the most influential personalities in the missionary and ecumenical movements of the twentieth century. The adjective has been chosen deliberately. To have called him outstanding would have given entirely the wrong impression. In spite of the high offices he held in the International Missionary Council and in the British Free Churches, and his service as moderator of the International Congregational Council, his worldwide ministry was chiefly exercised behind the scenes and out of the limelight: an assessment pointedly emphasized by his own choice of *Second Fiddle* as the title of his delightful autobiography published toward the end of his life. But his influence was wide-ranging, not only on the development of international structures of cooperation, but more particularly on individual people of many races and cultures who were grateful to be able to call him their friend.

The Christian Disciple

All those who knew and loved Norman would want to speak more of the impact of the man himself than of the considerable achievements of his long and varied career. In *One Man’s Testimony*, a little gem written shortly after the end of World War II, he set out in clear and simple terms the faith that had held him throughout the years. By that he lived, and the graciousness of his personality was a reflection of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, which had shaped his character from his earliest days. I first came to know him when he was nearly seventy years of age, ostensibly retired, but still full of vigor, lecturing, writing, counseling, supporting: sharing with the younger and less experienced the treasures of a richly stored mind and a profound faith. To see him striding up the path to a meeting over which I was to preside at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham was to know that, whatever the difficulties of the agenda, his wisdom would keep us from making any serious mistake.

Norman had extraordinary clarity of mind and a capacity for expression, both in speech and in writing, which rivaled the best of English prose. This was all the more remarkable in that in his youth he had lacked any formal education beyond the age of fourteen. Leonard Wilson, the bishop of Hong Kong interned by the Japanese and later bishop of Birmingham, once said of him, “He is my mentor for English style,” and after a particularly elegant speech of welcome to a conference of church leaders, a bystander was heard to remark, “Don’t you long for that man to split an infinitive!”

This pellucid clarity of thought and expression was a reflection
of the high standards and self-discipline that were among the
most striking characteristics of Norman's whole life. But they did
not make him, as they might have done, a formidable person in
whose company others felt diminished and ill at ease. He was
essentially a gentle soul, sensitive to the feelings of others and
with a compassionate understanding of human foibles and faults.
It is dangerous to describe anyone as Christlike, and Norman
would have found it acutely embarrassing to have had this as-
scription applied to him. But there can be no doubt that he mirrored
the Lord in whose presence he lived and whom he rejoiced to
serve. The impact of this on countless people of all ages and races
was his principal legacy.

The Foundation of Goodall's Career

Norman was born in Birmingham at the industrial heart of Eng-
land on August 30, 1896, the twelfth of thirteen children of Thomas
Goodall and Amelia Ingram. The family lived in cramped condi-
tions over their father's sweet shop in Handsworth and poverty
was never far from their door. Thomas Goodall was the son of
"an amiable drunkard," to use Norman's own description,
and in his youth belonged to a gang that secured notoriety by
breaking up political meetings. Intent on a similar venture one
Sunday evening, they entered Wesley Chapel. While his com-
panions slunk out, Thomas stayed and was soundly converted.
Some years later he shared a hymn book there with a young
servant girl whom he courted and subsequently married. To-
gether they made a home that became the formative influence on
Norman's life.

Thomas had no schooling, began work at eight years of age,
and was taught to read by a local barber. Amelia was illiterate
and remained so to the end of her days. But their deep Christian
faith and their standards of excellence were the matrix in which
Norman developed his love of literature and music. A young
violin teacher was given the use of the Goodalls' little parlor and
and in exchange Norman was offered free lessons. His tribute to this
unnamed musician, but above all to his father and mother, con-
stitute the most moving passages in his autobiography. The young
teacher opened up a world of beauty and delight in the midst of
ugly surroundings. Norman's father was a sterling example of
the combination of resolute faith and radical politics, informed
by an inquiring mind and a remarkably developed sense of literary
style. But it was obviously his mother's influence that shaped Nor-
man's character. "There was a moment at the end of her days," he
wrote, "when a brother and I were looking at her hands,
lined and worn with the years of labour in the service of those
she loved. Touching one of her hands my brother said, 'They
remind me of the words 'I bear on my body the marks of the
Lord Jesus.' He was right. In the whole realm of human rela-
tionships I have known no love greater than hers.'" Norman
would undoubtedly have said that the legacy of his own life
should properly be ascribed to these three people.

Formal education beyond the age of fourteen was not an
option for any boy with Norman's background. The straitened
circumstances of his parents made it necessary for him to take a
job as an office boy to supplement the marginal family income.
However, the routine duties of a junior clerk in the South Staf-
fordshire Water Authority quickly failed to satisfy the ambitions
and abilities of a youth who was taking every advantage he could
of evening classes, and he was encouraged by an older employee
to apply for a clerical post in the Birmingham City Treasurer's
Department. He was interviewed and appointed by the treasurer
himself: a circumstance that might well have opened up a distin-
guished career in governmental service, for Norman was brought
to the notice of someone who was to play a prominent role in
the Civil Service during World War I. That is to anticipate, how-
ever. In the meantime Norman had to work his passage in the
junior ranks of local government.

In 1915 Norman enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps,
and after a short spell of service was seconded for clerical duties
to the Ministry of Munitions, to which Arthur Collins, the Bir-
mingham City treasurer, had been lent as financial adviser. En-
countering his former employee as he was leaving the ministry,
Collins handed Norman a note to take to St. Ermin's Hotel, West-
minster, adding, "You are the first member of the staff of the
Department of National Service. The hotel has been command-
deered by the Office of Works and the resitants are beginning to
move out. I shall be joining you there before long and Neville
Chamberlain will arrive as soon as he can free himself from Bir-
mingham." Thus began Norman's wartime service in what was
to become a major government department in which he rapidly
assumed increasing responsibilities as Arthur Collins's private
secretary. This brought him into close contact with ministers of
the Crown and high-ranking officials, giving him the opportunity
to display the administrative gifts that in later years were to be
placed at the service of the world church.

When the war ended, Norman was urged to enter the per-
manent Civil Service, in which he would doubtless have had a
distinguished career. But he felt an irresistible call to the Con-
gregational ministry. The problem was that he had no educational

qualifications for admission to training and his heart was set on
entering Mansfield College at Oxford, which was open only to
postgraduates with a first degree in another discipline. Norman
had not even a school-leaving certificate.

He was encouraged to seek out the principal, the renowned
Dr. Selbie, to whom he explained his predicament. This wise man
obviously spotted the latent gifts of the young civil servant and
promised that he could sit an entrance examination if he would
prepare for it over the next six months by learning some Greek
and Latin, reading the Bible, and practicing essay writing. Thus
it came about that Norman entered Mansfield in 1919 to read the
Honours School of Theology under a distinguished faculty, which
included C. H. Dodd, G. Buchanan Gray, and Vernon Bartlett.
He secured a respectable degree, which was underwritten thirty
years later by an Oxford award of a D.Phil. for a thesis on "The
Principles and Characteristics of Missionary Policy during the Last
Fifty Years Illustrated by the History of the LMS." To the end of
his life he was a devoted son of the college that had given him
such an unexpected opportunity, serving for many years as a
member of its governing body.

Ministry and Mission

In 1920 Norman married Doris Stanton, a medical doctor and the
daughter of a barrister. They would have two sons and one daughter
in the years ahead. On completion of his Oxford course, they offered for service abroad with the London Missionary Society, but the regulations in force prevented them from being accepted because wives were not allowed to take appointments alongside their husbands. So Norman was ordained to the ministry in 1922 at Trinity Congregational Church, Walthamstow, where he remained in pastoral charge for six years until he moved, for another eight years, to a church in the London suburb of New Barnet. In both these congregations he came to value the meaning of Christian fellowship, which, while internally mutually supportive, was outward-looking to mission throughout the world. His people in their turn experienced his sensitive conduct of worship and the quality of his pastoral care, which were to be placed at the service of so many others in the years that followed.

The summons to ministry to the churches overseas was only to be postponed, for in 1936 Norman was invited to become a staff member of the London Missionary Society with secretarial responsibility for India and the South Pacific. This led to extensive travel throughout these regions and a widening circle of personal contacts with missionaries and government officials. His account of visits to 140 Indian villages, his close ties with Dr. Howard Somervell, the Everest explorer and renowned surgeon in charge of the South Travancore Medical Mission at Neyyoor, and his meetings with Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, and Dr. Ambedkar illustrate the depth and range of his involvement in the service to which he was committed. Clearly he also fell in love with the islands and people of the South Pacific; many of the people became his personal friends. All this prepared him for the wider responsibilities that before long he was asked to shoulder.

In 1944 Norman was appointed to succeed Dr. William Paton as London secretary of the International Missionary council (IMC), and this was to place him at the center of the developing ecumenical movement. The office was based at Edinburgh House where the Conference of British Missionary Societies had its headquarters. As a member of its committees Norman had come into intimate contact with its formidable secretariat: J. H. Oldham, Kenneth Maclennan, and William Paton himself. He was therefore no stranger to the tasks that now confronted him.

The ending of World War II necessitated IMC’s facing the future of the German missions, which, together with those of the occupied countries of Europe cut off from their home bases, had become the responsibility of the IMC during hostilities. The complex problems of dealing with a changed situation landed on Norman’s desk, involving establishing relations of confidence with missionary leaders in Europe for which his diplomatic skills and sensitivity were admirably fitted. Furthermore, there was the challenge of reassessing the entire missionary strategy in the confusion of the postwar world.

Plans were afoot for bringing into being the World Council of Churches (WCC), but the missionary organizations felt that the problems confronting them were so urgent that they had to take immediate steps to call an international conference under the auspices of the IMC. Norman was not convinced. He thought that it was better to wait until the WCC had been inaugurated. However, he was overruled and in 1947 a conference was convened at Whitby, Ontario, to review the whole strategy of mission. Norman played a significant part in its preparation and conduct. Writing about it many years later he said, "It is never possible to measure the results of such a meeting as Whitby. If some of its hopes and expectations were never fulfilled this is another reminder both of the age-long mystery of iniquity and the need for a universal Church equipped for a world-wide task and with wisdom and spiritual resources equal to it."

However, the keynote of the conference was the conviction that henceforth the missionary task could be undertaken only in full partnership between the younger and older churches: a conviction that was to take time to be established among those upon whom the missionary societies relied for support and who found it hard to recognize and break with the past assumptions of imperialism. Nevertheless, Norman was convinced that thinking must go much further. A new theology of mission had to be worked out in the radically changed situation of the postwar world. This led to the planning of a further conference of the IMC, held in Willingen, Germany, July 5–17, 1952.

Those who were involved maintain that its conception and conduct were very largely Norman’s work. Strangely enough, however, he does not even mention it in his autobiography. The explanation may be that he was disappointed with its outcome. Some of those who knew him best go so far as to say that he thought it was a failure. That is hardly borne out by the introductory chapter he wrote to his edited report of the conference in which he argued that Willingen was a milestone on the road to a theology of mission and not a terminus.

At all events it is clear that Norman believed that the missionary organizations had to come to understand that they were agencies of the world church, and for the next decade he persistently worked to bring about the full integration of the IMC and the WCC. The opportunity to do so was opened up by his appointment in 1954 as secretary of a joint committee to explore ways and means of achieving this end. In the face of a good deal of resistance from those, like Max Warren, who felt that the freedom of missionary societies would be imperiled by integration with ecclesiastical structures, Norman’s conviction that church and mission were indivisible won the day. He saw his endeavors finally consummated at the Third Assembly of the World Council at New Delhi in 1961, when integration was finally adopted and Lesslie Newbigin, “representative of the world mission at its best,” was appointed an associate general secretary of the WCC.

On any estimate this was a historic milestone in the evolution of the world church, and with his retirement due at the end of the New Delhi Assembly, Norman’s career might well have been thought to have reached its climax. But it is arguable that the last phase of his life not only added to the legacy he left to the ecumenical movement, but actually may prove to have been of even greater significance. His contribution to the WCC continued with the invitation to serve for another two to three years as assistant general secretary to Dr. W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, and he was later to edit the report of the Fourth Assembly at Uppsala in 1968. Other important publications came from his pen. Following his definitive history of the London Missionary Society in 1954, the Oxford University Press published what have become two standard works on the ecumenical movement: The Ecumenical Movement: What It Is and What It Does in 1961, and Ecumenical Progress: A Decade of Change in the Ecumenical Movement, eleven years later.

Retirement gave Norman the opportunity to devote himself to interchurch relations in a variety of ways. He was moderator of the International Congregational Council from 1962–66, and moderator of the Free Church Federal Council in the following year—and he played an influential part in bringing together the English Presbyterians and Congregationalists and later the Churches of Christ in the United Reformed Church. He lectured extensively as visiting professor of mission at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, at the Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin, at the Jesuit Heythrop College, and at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

The awakened interest of Roman Catholics in the ecumenical movement following Vatican Council II meant that many were
concerned to enter into serious dialogue with leading Protestants. Who was better informed or more sensitively equipped for this than Norman? Hence the invitations that came to him to lecture in Dublin and at Heythrop, where he made many friends. But it was what he called his "Roman Pilgrimage" that in perspective may be judged the climax of his contribution to ecumenism. The way had been paved in Dublin and at Heythrop as well as in many personal friendships. But there can be little doubt that his two visits (when he was nearly eighty years of age) to the English College in Rome, in 1975 and 1976, were fruitful beyond any immediately apparent result. He established relations of confidence with both faculty and students, who appreciated the integrity of his Protestant convictions as well as his openness to all that was best in Roman Catholicism. In particular, a firm friendship was forged with the rector of the English College, Mgr. Murphy O'Connor, later bishop of Arundel, who visited Norman in Oxford in the last stages of Norman's life and who paid a moving tribute to him at his memorial service in London.

Norman sums up his Roman Pilgrimage by saying that he is not sure whether it 'has made me a Catholic Protestant or a Protestant Catholic. I hope it has made me a better Christian.' If that was true for him, it was certainly true for those who sat at his feet. The influence of such an encounter is impossible to measure, though it is likely to have had more lasting results than many of the more formal conferences that are an increasing feature of Roman Catholic/Protestant relations. At any rate, among those taking the lead in open commitment to ecumenical pilgrimage in Britain are some who shared in the eventful weeks of Norman's own pilgrimage to Rome.

At the end of his life, Norman was cared for by an old friend, Dr. Elizabeth Welford, whom he engaged to marry after the death of his wife. On January 1, 1985, two days before the wedding, he died from a heart attack at her house in Oxford.

Norman was no facile ecumenist. He spent his life wrestling with the obstacles to understanding among Christians and the difficulties inherent in working together with those of differing backgrounds and convictions. But he brought to everything he did not only patience and perseverance, but the readiness to listen to and learn from others, which won their respect and affection. While he was too honest to evade or minimize problems, he never allowed them to weaken his vision of One Church United for Mission. That is Norman Goodall's abiding legacy.

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Notes

5. Ibid., pp. 42-67.

6. Ibid., p. 93.
9. Ibid., pp. 133–47.
10. Ibid., p. 147.

Selected Works by Norman Goodall


Norman Goodall also wrote numerous articles and pamphlets on mission and theology, a comprehensive collection of which are included in the archives of the London Missionary Society, held at Dr. Williams' Library, Gordon Square, London.
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