

Order: Ecumenical History 1968-1988

by Lucas Bensley

A bridge between the Church and the world. That was the founding purpose of the Order: Ecumenical, according to some of its documents of records. In another sense, the Order was a response to many trends it identified in the Twentieth Century, including the social impact of urbanization, the “shrinking of the globe,” and changes to older institutions such as religion and family structure. In particular, it strove to realize the missional aspect of devout Christianity by helping communities realize and affirm common “polity” (or identity), the pooling of resources, and other material goals tethered to liturgy and daily worship amongst its members. (The O:E and “On Becoming An Historical Order”).

In so doing, the members of the Order: Ecumenical saw themselves as part of a “spirit movement” that would both help to maintain the relevancy and mission of the Church as they engaged with the issues and concerns of the modern world. Though it honored its roots in the Church and the Christian Faith and Life Community of Texas, like the Institute of Cultural Affairs, the Order has been described as a form of secular religious order - meaning, it does not presuppose religious background of existing or potential members, and serves people of all faiths.

That being said, what exactly did the Order: Ecumenical do? Since its incorporation in 1973, the Order was driven by a mission of building “Primal Community” in an effort to “awaken every human being across the globe to his and her full humanness.” This mission, in the eyes of the Order, required both fidelity to the “historical church” in the way of religious studies and care of religious houses, and material projects that “dramatize need” similar to the ICA’s work in the 5th City.

This was simply the continuation and expansion of the mission of the Institute of Cultural Affairs previous work to a more globalized vision, as part of a “turn to the world” that marked many of the Institute’s activities during the 1970’s. To do that, the Order members served in a number of different capacities and roles to apply their mission to sociological models: as researchers, trainers, and “operationists” of communal modes (Brief History of the O:E).

Order members went about spreading and fulfilling its mission on a global scale its prioritization of economics, politics, and culture, both within and beyond the organization.

With regard to **economics**, the Order assisted communities with marshalling and organizing resources both material and human. Essential to this task was the fostering of cadres and guilds in the communities they worked in. Guilds were facilities and sites of operation funded by the Order and designed to serve as places of meeting, housing, and food in the communities they

served. The “local” nature of these guilds were crucial to their function, as the development and utilization of local cadres or membership was essential for their perpetuation. They enacted research to identify local leaders and the thrust of the local movement, training and consultation to identify political, social, and economic priorities and concerns, as well as enabling participation in meetings, conferences, and events. As a result, communities from Chicago to Sydney Australia created plans ranging from a single year to forty years, staking out strengths, concerns, and priorities regional, national, and global. In so doing, the Order operated on the basis of “permeating” communities of varying scale and depth to help inculcate “humanness” at levels micro and macro (Permeation and Dissemination).

An essential element of these works of “**polity**” was the dissemination of religious houses and priors, in conjunction with an experimental leadership team called the “Global Panchayat.” As Joseph Slicker put it, these programs were structures that could serve as a test of the “glue” that keeps societies together (Global Order Polity). Put another way, the polity efforts of the Order served as an experiment to address “the contradiction blocking the formation of an inclusive polity structure applicable on any level of society” (Collection of Brief Essays on the Dynamics of Order Polity).

Religious Houses played an important role in this experiment, with leadership teams of priors to live and conduct programs in communities around the world. Among the highest priorities of Religious Houses were “spirit infusion”, which involved reaching out to and consulting with a region’s religious establishment, training residents via odysseys, local church labs, and internships, and style formulation -- that is, the formation of structures and missional families to further these efforts (Report on Religious Houses). The main purpose of the Religious Houses, was penetrating and permeating communities down to a micro-level in order to “actualize sociological rebirth” and “conquer historical tyranny” at a perceived moment of historical change (Symbolic centrum--Religious House Document, Edges of a Religious House Doc).

Team priors of the Religious Houses were charged with the care and representation of the Order in the communities it served. Prior served as pedagogues, social engineers, and “spirit gurus” in their assigned communities. As teachers, priors utilized various methods, such as charting or life methods, to help residents articulate their concerns and most immediate priorities, while social engineering methods, in the way of gridding and the like, served to make participants realize themselves as part of larger social fabrics. Finally, as “spirit gurus,” priors could provide services, such as Scripture lifemethods or meditations on Psalms, to reaffirm the purpose of life and the place of its members within it (Profound Function of Priorship).

The Panchayat was an eight-year project from 1978 to 1986, creating a global leadership team that utilized networks to identify issues on a global scale and plan how to address them. In the 1980s, in particular, the Panchayat was envisioned as an experiment to conduct research that

would pull together reflections, curriculum, and work of past Global Research Assemblies in order to further realize the Order's mission of achieving polity in the face of great political and cultural changes of that decade (Order Polity: the Experiment of the Eighties). This work necessitated many "regional consults" to check in with the Houses of the 54 different regions serviced by the Order at the time. Reports published in 1978-1979 noted an apparent readiness of many communities around the world for the kind of community development work the Religious Houses were conducting, but indicated a lack of regularity in pedagogical tools such as "spirit methods." The Panchayat confirmed the success of the Religious House experiment and moved to expand priorship recruitment, as well as to offer more development programs such as Global Women's Foruchms, Community Youth Forums, and LENS courses that had witnessed success in the past.(Panchayat Working Notes).

Like the Institute of Cultural Affairs, the Order highly prioritized **culture** and fellowship amongst its ranks. Community life, in the way of how decisions were made, worshipping practices, and everyday life, featured heavily into this. Daily worship was the "primal symbolic activity" by which the community within the Order was called "to consciousness" (Symbolic Life of the Order). These internal activities fell in line with the Order's prioritization of the "New Religious Mode" from 1968 onwards, a system by which values of poverty, chastity, and obedience were conceptualized along spiritual lines of thought.

Global "Odysseys" were conducted from 1970 to 1975 to visit the areas served by the Order around the world in order to evaluate the cultural "signs" (or identities), general operating concepts, and "fears" of different communities. In other words, even the interior life and cultural concerns of the Order fell in line with the mission of helping to form a global-minded citizenship and polity (Global Odyssey, My Journey).

During the 1980s the Order identified a period of great transition in the methods and challenges and marked the end of the Order itself. In November, 1988, the structures of the Order Ecumenical and the family order system were "called out of being" at the Global Conference in Oaxtapec, Mexico, partly a result of the Institute's turn to decentralizing and reorganizing its programs and priorities.