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# A Report on Our Eight Years With the Church in Europe

Robert Tobias

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A Report on  
Our Eight Years

*With the Church  
in Europe*

By  
Robert Tobias



The work of Robert Tobias in Europe for eight years following the second World War has been a vital part of ecumenical ministry of the Disciples of Christ on the Continent of Europe.

This young man with deep consecration and single-ness of purpose went forth into the war-torn areas of Europe to bear his Christian witness. He has been a faithful ambassador of Christ.

Administratively, his work has been related to the office of the president of the United Society. It is with genuine pleasure, therefore, that we submit this final report which Mr. Tobias has prepared for the brotherhood.

It is fortunate that a year of interpretation of the significance of this work has been made possible through the organization of a special committee - the Committee on Ecumenical Fellowship and Service of the Disciples of Christ, which is jointly sponsored by the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity, the Committee on Relief Appeals of the International Convention and the United Society. This program of interpretation will be under the direction of Mr. Tobias and will be for the purpose of telling the story of the past and presenting a challenge for the future.

- A. Dale Fiers



# Report to The United Christian Missionary Society

on our

## EUROPEAN SERVICE

Robert Tobias

### Introduction

Le Havre - 1945 - 1953

On June 2, 1945, we approached Le Havre, France. Our troop ship felt its way into a harbor choked with sunken ships and floating mines. The bluffs above were strewn with broken stones, bricks and splintered wood. This had been the city of Le Havre. Several hours later, we disembarked on a temporary floating pier, boarded a military train, and after a nightmare ride through the rubble of many cities, arrived in war-pauperized Paris.

Eight years later, with our three Swiss-born children, we took a fast day train from elegant Paris to Le Havre, through beautiful fields and quiet colorful towns. Rebuilt Le Havre was a clean, modern port city. The harbor facilities were excellent. Fifteen minutes after leaving our train we were aboard a fast, luxury liner and ready to return home.

A great deal has happened to us in those eight years.

### Purpose of Mission

In March/April, 1945, Dr. W.A. Visser t' Hooft, General Secretary of the Provisional Committee of the World Council of Churches, slipped away from the battlefield of Europe for conference with Christian friends in America. They reported that European churches would need much help to rebuild,



Robert and Gertrude Tobias with their three children, Mark, Kathryn and Jan

provide relief and leadership as soon as fighting ceased. American churches began planning for assistance in terms of relief, funds and personnel. In conferences in Indianapolis it was decided that Robert Tobias should be commissioned by Disciples churches and supported partly by youth conference Character Bonds to help the French Protestant Youth movements with their relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction through C.I.M.A.D.E. (Protestant inter-movement agency for evacuees.)

Terms of the appointment were broad; there was work enough for any and every ability. When a year later, the World Council of Churches requested our services in Geneva, the appointment was extended another year without restrictions. In 1947 The United Christian Missionary Society took responsibility for our support. In general our appointment was to have four emphases: representative responsibilities to the Disciples; service to and for the World Council of Churches; liaison between Dis-



ciples churches in America and certain interests of Disciples in Europe; interpretation of the European situation and of the Ecumenical Movement to the American churches. But in a generous spirit, the United Society and the Brotherhood did not rigidly define our tasks, and we have been able to confront most urgent demands and opportunities as they have arisen.

### Types of Work

Included in our travels have been England, France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy, Austria and Switzerland. Our work has varied from driving trucks to consulting with Patriarchs, from ladling soup to administering programs running into several million dollars.

#### 1. C.I.M.A.D.E. - France

##### Relief

Our first task in hungry Paris was to distribute relief foods to pastors' families. A "victory" bike with a basket on front and a sack behind served as "truck." Six months later at the request of the World Council of Churches, we purchased a fleet of trucks and semi-trailers from army surplus, and organized a temporary transport system to carry goods to the French provinces, Belgium and Holland. Foods and clothing were piling in from Britain and America. Blankets and basic household and medical supplies we were able to purchase from army surplus.

##### Reconstruction

By August of 1945, as rail lines were untwisted and re-laid, thousands of evacuees began to return from South France to their towns in North and East

France. There they found homes destroyed, food scarcely available, and little or no social, welfare and moral assistance. The C.I.M.A.D.E. received some twenty wooden barracks from Don Suisse (Swiss gifts) and the World Council of Churches, and we spent several weeks setting them up in Le Havre, St. Lo, Boulogne, Calais, Dunkirk, St. Die and other devastated cities. From these "foyers," the C.I.M.A.D.E. organized soup lines, social and medical assistance programs, educational and spiritual services. By the end of 1945, I had spent considerable time at each of the foyers, either in its construction, or in bringing relief supplies, or organizing a series of cinema/educational programs. Limitations of language hindered our contribution at this stage, but the fact that friends had come from abroad, come quickly and in the name of Christ, and were willing to share their life seemed to mean much more in those days than extended intellectual intercourse of later normal, comfortable times. Laborers, conscious of the rigid barriers in their own class system, were constantly amazed that "the American priest" could not only direct barrack construction, but as "engineer," did not hesitate to join with them - "it's unheard of" - in the manual labor involved. These experiences were among the most memorable and perhaps most significant of our eight years.

## 2. World Council of Churches Services

### Inter-Church Aid - East Europe and Orthodox

In the Spring of 1946, following our collaboration in relation to the bulk transport and distribution of relief goods, the World Council of Churches asked that we come to the Geneva staff of the Department of Reconstruction and Inter-Church Aid. The United Society readily agreed, continuing its financial and spiritual support. In 1950, the International Convention of the Disciples of Christ, re-



cognizing the significance of the work already undertaken by the United Society, the opportunities and the responsibility of the entire Brotherhood, named us "Ambassador" to the staff of the World Council.

We began in Geneva in July. My first task was to fly to Bucharest and Sofia for consultation with Rumanian and Bulgarian churchmen regarding the war experiences and post-war situation and needs of churches there. No help had as yet been sent from abroad, and no visitor had been there. I spent a month in those countries. The urgency of getting help to them became terribly acute. In Rumania I had talked not only with churchmen, but also with Christian and Red Cross leaders, Bible Society and Y.M.C.A. secretaries, government leaders and the King. Similarly in Bulgaria. The situation was still fluid, but there was great fear that increased suppression of schools, churches and welfare activities was imminent. Action was taken, and though little and late, and almost the kiss of death, it has been a continuing cause of rejoicing and fellowship for Christian friends there.

Since 1947, responsibility for the Department's program of Inter-Church Aid to Poland (for three years), Czechoslovakia, Austria, Rumania, Bulgaria and Albania was placed on my desk. To these were added in 1948, Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey. With the exception of Poland, all of these areas are predominantly Eastern Orthodox in their faith. Until we left Geneva, I had the privilege of being responsible for World Council assistance and relations to Eastern Orthodox churches. It has been remarkably gratifying for one from a church as different as ours to have had this experience, and no less gratifying that Disciples, together with the Episcopalians and Anglicans, who, like us, have no immediate confessional link in Europe, could share in such a significant way in the renewal of those churches.

Mention of the "Disciples Churches", when traveling in those areas, is enough to cause an outpouring of appreciation which we cannot merit, but which provides opportunities for fuller and richer conversation and fellowship.

### Fraternal Workers

In the Winter of 1947, high up in the Alps, eight "Fraternal Workers" came together for the World Council of Churches; first Mid-Winter "Fraternal Workers' Retreat." These were people commissioned by churches of other countries and confessions. By February of 1953, at the seventh annual retreat held at the Ecumenical Institute near Geneva, Ecumenical Fraternal Workers then in Europe numbered nearly ninety (including international field staff of the World Council of Churches). In addition there have been numerous exchanges of delegations, theological professors and pastors. It has been the task of your representative to organize that program, counselling with churches and individual appointees.

### Contributed Goods

In 1952, churches abroad shipped five million dollars worth of relief foods and clothing to Europe. Distribution was made through the churches to refugees, victims of drought and political or economic discrimination. The material relief program of the churches through the World Council of Churches was first organized by the late Dr. S.C. Michelfelder. For the past five years it has been administered and coordinated by your representative. Its significance is beyond measure. However, there have been times when I would have traded the maneuvering of hundreds of tons of foods for a bicycle, a basket of food, and personal contact with a pastor's family in Paris.



## Departmental and other Programs

In addition to these specific areas of responsibility, I had some part in the development of the youth aid program in 1947, the youth work camp program, laymen's secretariat, and other projects. My appointment to Assistant Directorship of the Department in 1948 entailed a number of additional activities in relation to the Department's policy and program. Because of intimate contacts with East Europe, some contribution has been made to the discussion on the Church and Communism. It was also natural that I should serve on several committees, not the least of which was the committee on the History of the Ecumenical Movement, and take part in several conferences of the World Council, the Amsterdam Assembly, etc. For the past 3 years I have served as Treasurer for the World Christian Youth Commission (YMCA, YWCA, WSCF, WCC, WCCE.) Beyond these activities, I have been only incidentally involved in the work of other Departments of the World Council.

### 3. Disciples Liaison

The International Convention has appointed official representatives to the Assemblies of the World Council, and Dr. G.W. Buckner, Jr., represents the Brotherhood on the Central Committee. It has been a joy to us to work with these men, sharing reports, making several study trips together, and conferring on significant issues.

#### Fellow-Disciples in Europe

At one time there was a small movement in Poland, a congregation in Denmark, and a large number of "Evangelical Christians" in Russia which had fellowship with Disciples of Christ. The congregation in Denmark has been disbanded, the group in Poland has placed its allegiance elsewhere, and the Evangelical Christians in Russia are not in a position to have



intimate contact with us. There are at present no indigenous Disciples congregations in Europe.

### Other Communion in Europe

This does not mean, however, that we do not have fellowship with any churches in Europe. Indeed, the fact that we do not have recognizable counter-parts or outposts in Europe has made it possible for us to enter into conversation and fellowship with most churches - Lutheran, Reformed, Orthodox, Methodist and Baptist - to a greater degree than those churches which do have some unilateral confessional relationship. Our relationship has been such that we could learn, share and counsel together without the handicap of preconceived and often prejudicial ideas on their part as to who we are. At the same time, we have been able to converse with, and help bring into the consciousness and fellowship of the larger ecumenical movement some minority groups similar to ours, which, had we established unilateral contacts, would likely have remained at the periphery, if not outside of the ecumenical fellowship. Disciples inter-church aid (Week of Compassion) however, has been channeled largely to very small free churches and to Orthodox churches which have no strong counter-part abroad to support them. This has been the most normal, significant and effective way. Lutheran churches have had Lutheran aid, Reformed have had Presbyterian, Methodist and so on. The Orthodox and Evangelical or Free Church Brethren would have been the "forgotten" churches but for help of our churches and the Episcopal churches. Our help has abetted their continued witness and vital renewal. More important even than material assistance has been our concern and fellowship.

### World Council of Churches

In many ways our nearest "kin" in Europe has been the ecumenical movement itself. World Council of

Churches conferences and proposals often echo or fulfill aspirations of some early Disciples. "Renewal and unity," the unofficial watchwords of the World Council of Churches, are not dissimilar to the Disciples plea for "restoration and unity." The World Council of Churches can profit from our mistakes and help channel our energies. It has been particularly gratifying that we could put some of our strength into projects for the renewal of the whole Church, and the unity of all churches. I mention only a few: The Ecumenical Institute provides a place and time for the churches to study, pray and work out programs of advance together; the Laymen's Secretariat has enabled laymen around the world to share their best inspiration and ideas; the Evangelism Secretariat has given the churches a center for exchanging information regarding evangelism and for common planning; the History of the Ecumenical Movement, a carefully documented record of developments away from and towards unity in the past, will help contemporary churches profit from past mistakes and revelation; and other ecumenical projects, some sponsored by the World Council of Churches, or by the Lutheran Church in East Germany, or the Reformed Church in France, or the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Churches in Turkey we have been privileged to participate in, with funds, personnel or ideas.

### Disciples at Home

Some articles have been written, some speeches and reports made, to various groups in the United States. The Christian Evangelist and World Call have been as liberal with space as I could be with time.

### Christian Unity

In 1950 the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity asked that I serve as its special representative in Europe. The association provided



funds to projects which we recommended as promoting Christian Unity in Switzerland, Germany, Yugoslavia, Italy, and established several profitable contacts with European churchmen.

### Week of Compassion

While technically there has been no organizational relationship between our appointment and the Week of Compassion, Dr. C.O. Hawley and I have had the closest and most cordial working relationships. From Europe we have sent stories, pictures and reports, which through the Week of Compassion have gone into the thinking and prayers of our people as they make their offerings for the dispossessed. The Week of Compassion through Dr. Hawley then channeled funds to needs in Europe asking that they be spent in consultation with the Disciples representative in Europe. It has been a happy arrangement. Its worth? Without some such overt demonstration of our concern for, and solidarity with needy people and the cause of Christ around the world, all our mouthings of charity, peace and unity would have been meaningless. With these gifts, our works were also able to be meaningful.

### Evaluation

It is for others to say what Disciples have accomplished in Europe these past eight years. I can only indicate a few apparent strong and weak points.

On the positive side, one can say that through the Ecumenical Institute, Ecumenical History, Evangelism, Lay and Youth Secretariats, various projects and conferences and aid to other churches, some contribution has been made towards Christian Unity. Through our Week of Compassion gifts of some \$100,000 a year we have made some contribution to renewal of faith and Christian work in critical areas of Europe. While one may question the theological validity of



their expressions of appreciation, several European churchmen have testified that without Disciples and Protestant Episcopal sharing, the remarkable renewal which has taken place in those areas could not have been possible.

A few, very few, minority Free Church movements with no international denominational affiliation know that in the World Council of Churches and the Disciples of Christ they have Christian brothers who neither forget nor forsake them.

I cannot forget the hungry, cold, homeless, miserable, and often despondent child, mother, pastor and others who have been comforted and encouraged to believe that God cares because of the small bits of food and clothing we have shared with them. Some we have now brought to new lands where they can begin again. Others will still need our comfort and assistance where they are.

I wish that it could have been possible to give more time to sharing with Disciples in America the joys and stimulation of our ecumenical work. There has not been time to participate as we ought in the work of the Study Department, and too little time for theological and ecclesiastical encounter with other churches. Many churches have come to know the name of Disciples. Now we should move farther into this field and let the European churches know what the Disciples stand for. This is a task which should be faced in any continuing representation.

Finally, the United Christian Missionary Society as a mission society is concerned about the propagation of the Gospel. We have not done conventional mission work in Europe. We have tried to join with churches there in facing our common tasks in the world about us.

Who knows how far our limited witness may reach? Utopian materialists have conversed earnestly on the realities of life as a Christian must face them. The darkness of despair has been replaced by the light of hope on thousands - millions of faces. Indigenous churches have been enabled to reach their own people with the good news that God loves them. Is this mission work? It seems in any case to be God's work, and He has seen fit to let us share in it. The limits on how much we might share have not yet been reached.

### A Look Ahead

"A great and effectual door" has been opened to us, in a way in which it has been opened to no other communion. Perhaps it is presumptuous, but I will still say that we ought to be one part of the ecumenical idea incarnate. For Disciples have as their purpose, that also of the ecumenical movement. At the same time they have the healthy body, the strength and tools of an organized church. This is not the place to develop the idea in detail, but in suggesting it, I wish only to say that every possibility is open to us to get on with being an effective organ of and for the ecumenical idea.

What next?

1. Study. What and why are we as Disciples driving at? What machinery have we, or ought we to have, to get on with it? It is important to get this clear before we go into a new phase of ecumenical and Disciples development.

2. Disciples mission strategy. Where are the vital spots on the life of the ecumenical movement where Disciples can and should participate, how and towards what ends? Careful study together with other churches and the World Council of Churches/Internation-

tional Missionary Council will probably indicate many more opportunities than we are as yet prepared to take up.

3. Personnel. Beyond official representatives to the World Council of Churches, and missionaries, it is a pre-requisite to fuller ecumenical encounter, mutual exhortation and common advance that there be extended exchanges of pastors, teachers, youth, laity, across confessional and national lines.

4. Continued Week of Compassion. Perhaps with a longer-range name related to missions, renewal and unity as well as material need.

This is obviously a matter for total Brotherhood thought and action, involving many of our agencies. The United Society has not in the past sought to go it alone, indeed has provided generous support to ecumenical enterprises and drawn in other agencies and individuals without seeking organizational credit.

The Brotherhood can surely count on no less in the future.

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Gertrude and I have been richly blessed in these eight years. During that time we were constantly sustained by the assurance that our churches and friends were concerned with us, as well as with the work. We are grateful to God that He has called our churches, the Society, and ourselves to such an experience.



Robert Tobias's Expense

June, 1945 - June, 1953

Supported by Youth Character Bonds (C.I.M.A.D.E. Special Fund administered by the Religious Education Department of the United Society):

Disbursements

1945-46	Program Expense	\$1,255.99
1946-47	Program Expense	2,953.95
Total from C.I.M.A.D.E. Fund:		<u>\$4,209.94</u>

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Paid from the Commission on Foreign Relations Special Fund (raised by the Men and Millions Movement; administered by the American Christian Missionary Society, 1917-1943; administered by the United Society, 1943-1953):

Disbursements

Date	Salary	Travel	Pension
4/18/47	\$ 150.00	\$ 685.00	
6/24/47	50.00	1,101.12	\$
1947-48	3,600.00	1,807.97	288.00
1948-49	3,600.00	1,706.78	288.00
1949-50	3,600.00	2,042.00	288.00
1950-51	3,600.00	4,112.14	288.00
1951-52	3,975.00	3,452.52	318.00
1952-53	3,975.00	4,293.00	318.00

Total paid from the Commission on Foreign Relations Special Fund: \$43,538.53

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