

CHURCH MISSION IN THE BEGINING OF THE 20th CENTURY, STOCKHOLM, 1925

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Abstract

The reason for which we decided to study this particular issue is that we have the concern that the Mission most of the times is being considered "outside" of the worship of the Church. Furthermore, we have the feeling that because of the western influence, as a Mission is considered only the activity of the Church towards the social part of life, and in that case the liturgical sense of the Church has been disappeared from the missionary's agenda and activity.

Therefore, the ecumenical movement, in this new stage obliges the participating member churches to reconsider their position as members of the One Body and called to one action. This calling is made more intense and more impelling by their ecumenical relationship. The meeting of the Churches in the name of the Lord and the power of Holy Spirit should no longer remain a dialogue between intellectuals.

In the history of 20th century Christian ecumenism, the Life and Work movement represents the attempt of Protestant and Orthodox churches to reach consensus on the church universal's practical role in society.

The Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work, Stockholm, 1925, tried to find a common basis for the churches to renew their efforts on behalf of peace and justice, and can be seen as a response to the inability of the churches to speak an effective word of peace during the First World War, a conflict which was, in effect, a Christian civil war.

The message of the Stockholm Conference begins with a call to repentance. The churches were invited to dedicate themselves anew to the task of witnessing to the power of the Gospel in all realms of life, in industry, society, politics and international relations, and „the world is too strong for divided Church.”

Europe had experienced the First World War, the social consequences of industrialisation and economic difficulties. All agreed that the church could not be silent, for that reason the moto of the Stockholm conference was “Doctrine divides, service unites.”

The goal of the conference was to provide an opportunity for churches in the world devise more effective means of addressing these issues by acting together. The weaknesses of divided Christendom had become apparent to those who were concerned for the witness of the churches in the modern Western world.

Keywords: Church mission, ecumenism, Stockholm, 1925

MAIN TEXT

The English word mission does not have its origin in the Bible. It is derived from the Latin, *mittere*, to send, not from any Greek or Hebrew roots. The classical text for the missionary task of the Church is found in the

words of the risen Christ to his disciples: “as the Father has sent me, so I also send you.” (John 20, 21). Just before Jesus returned to heaven, He commissioned His disciples this way: “Going into all the world, make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20).

It is God’s design to gather all creation under the Lordship of Christ (Eph 1,10), and to bring humanity and all creation into communion. As a reflection of the communion in the Triune God, the Church is God’s instrument in fulfilling this goal.¹

The Church² in the Greek language (the New Testament was written in Greek) is *ekklesia*, which means “a calling out,” especially “a religious congregation, an assembly”. The word designates the body of believers of which Jesus Christ is Head. It can designate the entire group worldwide, or it can designate a particular local group of individuals. Thus when Barnabas and Paul “assembled with the church,” they were assembling with and teaching a group of followers of Jesus Christ. This Church is called to manifest God’s mercy to humanity, and to bring humanity to its purpose, to praise and glorify God together with all the heavenly hosts. The mission of the Church is to serve the purpose of God as a gift given to the world in order that all may believe (John 17, 21).

The Church, embodying in its own life the mystery of salvation and the transfiguration of humanity, participates in the mission of Christ to reconcile all things to God and to one another through Christ. Through its worship (leitourgia); service, which includes the stewardship of creation (diakonia); and proclamation (kerygma) the Church participates in and points to the reality of the Kingdom of God. In the power of the Holy Spirit the Church testifies to the divine mission in which the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.³

Since these origins, the Church has always been dedicated to proclaiming in word and deed the good news of salvation in Christ, celebrating the sacraments, especially the eucharist, and forming Christian communities. This effort has sometimes encountered bitter resistance; it has sometimes been hindered by opponents or even betrayed by the sinfulness of the messengers. In spite of such difficulties, this proclamation has produced great fruit (Mark 4:8, 20, 26-32).⁴

The Christian understanding of the Church and its mission is rooted in the vision of God’s great design (or “economy”) for all creation: the “kingdom” which was both promised by and manifested in Jesus Christ. According to the Bible, man and woman were created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27), so bearing an inherent capacity for communion (in Greek *koinonia*) with God and with one another⁵.

In exercising its mission, the Church cannot be true to itself without giving witness (martyria) to God’s will for the salvation and transformation of the world, growth of the church is regarded to the spread of the Gospel⁶. That is why it started at once preaching the Word, bearing witness to the great deeds of God and inviting everyone to repentance (metanoia), baptism (Acts 2: 37-38) and the fuller life that is enjoyed by the followers of Jesus.⁷

Mission has the demand to transfer the essence of the Gospel, which is the person of Jesus. But not just through the teaching, or through a system of ideas, but mainly through the process of worshipping and calling the Holy Spirit to change the visible things for the final union with the living Christ.⁸

The mission of the Church ensues from the nature of the Church as the body of Christ, sharing in the ministry of Christ as Mediator between God and his creation. At the heart of the Church’s vocation in the world is the proclamation of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus the Lord, crucified and risen. Through its internal life of eucharistic worship, thanksgiving, intercessory prayer, through planning for mission and

¹ The Nature and Mission of the Church, (1998) A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement, *Faith and Order Paper 198*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, pdf. Text, p. 9

² The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the Kingdom. However, the Church on earth is not yet the full visible realisation of the Kingdom. Being also an historical reality, it is exposed to the ambiguities of all human history and therefore needs constant repentance and renewal in order to respond fully to its vocation.

³ The Nature and Mission of the Church, (1998), p. 10

⁴ The church towards a common vision, (2013), *Faith and Order Paper No. 214*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, p. 7

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5

⁶ David Hesselgrave, (2000), *Planting Churches Cross Culturally*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, p. 42

⁷ The Nature and Mission of the Church, (1998), p. 10

⁸ Horia Dumitrescu, (2009), The ecclesiological character of the Church’s mission, in *Studi Ecumenici*, in the volume of International Conference, *Ecclesiology. A scriptural, patristic approach*, Curtea de Argeş, p. 250, apud Anastasios Yannoulatos, Culture and Gospel, Some observations from the Orthodox tradition and experience, in *International Review of Mission*, vol.74, 1985, p. 187.

evangelism, through a daily life-style of solidarity with the poor, through advocacy even to confrontation with the powers that oppress human beings, the churches are trying to fulfil this evangelistic vocation⁹.

The Church is called and empowered to share the suffering of all by advocacy and care for the poor, the needy and the marginalised. This entails critically analysing and exposing unjust structures, and working for their transformation. The Church is called to proclaim the words of hope and comfort of the Gospel, by its works of compassion and mercy (Lk.4:18-19). This faithful witness may involve Christians themselves in suffering for the sake of the Gospel. The Church is called to heal and reconcile broken human relationships and to be God's instrument in the reconciliation of human division and hatred (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). It is also called, together with all people of goodwill, to care for the integrity of creation in addressing the abuse and destruction of God's creation, and to participate in God's healing of broken relationships between creation and humanity.¹⁰

Diversity in unity and unity in diversity are gifts of God to the Church. Through the Holy Spirit God bestows diverse and complementary gifts on all the faithful for the common good, for service within the community and to the world (1 Cor 12:7 and 2 Cor 9:13). No one is self-sufficient. The disciples are called to be one, while enriched by their diversities - fully united, while respectful of the diversity of persons and community groups (cf. Acts 2; 15; Eph 2:15-16).¹¹

There is a rich diversity of Christian life and witness born out of the diversity of cultural and historical context. The Gospel has to be rooted and lived authentically in each and every place. It has to be proclaimed in language, symbols and images that engage with, and are relevant to, particular times and particular contexts. The communion of the Church demands the constant interplay of cultural expressions of the Gospel if the riches of the Gospel are to be appreciated for the whole people of God.¹²

Despite of the painful divisions in the corps of the Church, which is the established trans-historical communal reality, standing on the unbroken unity of being, of belonging together in the uniting power of the Holy Spirit. We must keep the balance between the horizontal and the vertical dimension of the function of the church and we must participate in a mission of the Church that is much greater than we can even begin to understand. David Bosch described the importance of this insight as follows in his book: "... mission is not primarily an activity of the church but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit, through the Father that includes the church. Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission."¹³

The life of the early Christian community was shaped by a twofold orientation; towards the world in a movement of *diastole* and towards God in one of *systole*. These orientations constitute the being of the Church as mission and as liturgy, and neither should be confused or separated from the other.¹⁴

One of the most comprehensive definitions of the Church's mission is that given by John Stott: „Mission describes everything the church is sent into the world to do,”¹⁵ and the church could not remain indifferent to the consequences of the First World War.

One world takes shape in dialogue and through living together with people from other traditions, denominations, religions and world views. One's own faith is related to the beliefs of others and is realised precisely in relationship with the other, also with the stranger. Not only 'listening to the sisters and brothers' in faith, but also encounter with believers of other religions provide the opportunity to become sure of oneself, to change and so to express one's own faith.¹⁶

Ecumenism first became a "movement" in the period of evident disruption of the church, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the beginning of the apostolic period, however, responsible leaders of the church have struggled to overcome differences over doctrine and to clarify questions of

⁹ J. Matthey, (2005), *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation, You Are the Light of the World: Statements on Mission by the World Council of Churches*, Geneva, WCC, p. 8.

¹⁰ *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, (1998), p. 10.

¹¹ *The Nature and Mission of the Church A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, (1998) *Faith and Order Paper 198*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, p. 12.

¹² *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics*, (1998) *Faith and Order Paper no. 182*, Geneva, World Council of Churches.

¹³ David Bosch, (1990), *Transforming Mission*, New York: Orbis, p. 390

¹⁴ Horia Dumitrescu, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

¹⁵ John Stott, (1975), *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, London, p.30.

¹⁶ *Ecumenism in the 21st Century, Conditions – Theological Foundations – Perspectives*, (2015), Published by Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), p. 9

Christian life and questions of constitution and law in the church (the treatment of apostates in persecution, standardization of the date of Easter, recognition of decisions of synods and councils).¹⁷

In the 19th century, the ecumenical movement gained impetus from three sources: from the division of the churches on the mission field; from insight into the social needs of industrialized nations, the following can be given as important dates: missionary conferences in London in 1878 and 1888; the Ecumenical Missionary Conference in New York in 1900, founding of the YMCA in 1844 and the YWCA in 1855, of the World Alliance of YMCAs in 1892, the World Alliance of YWCAs in 1893, and the World Student Christian Federation in 1895.¹⁸

In the history of 20th century Christian ecumenism, the Life and Work movement represents the attempt of Protestant and Orthodox churches to reach consensus on the church universal's practical role in society.

The missionary conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 was certainly one of the most significant gatherings of Christians held this century. Arising out of the Student Volunteer Movement and adopting as its slogan, „the evangelization of the world in this generation”. The meeting called for an overall strategy to evangelise all the non-Christian world” and, to this end, for a renewal of spiritual vigour in the Western churches¹⁹.

The beginning of modern ecumenism was a world missionary conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. Mission, proclaiming salvation in Christ with a common voice, was the initial driving impulse of the search for unity. From that conference flowed streams that carried the movement's continuing priorities:

- Common service, which found early expression in the Life and Work movement whose first world conference was held in Stockholm in 1925;
- Common fellowship, which was embodied in the Faith and Order movement whose first world conference was held in Lausanne in 1927; The Greek word for fellowship expresses the idea of sharing, of having something in common with somebody else. Common participation takes on a double form: giving and receiving. Christian fellowship seriously involves both aspects. Christian fellowship is vertical as well as horizontal. The horizontal plane presupposes the vertical for its very existence. John described the vertical dimension this way: "Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). The horizontal dimension of fellowship is the habitual sharing, the constant giving to and receiving from each other, which is the true, authentic pattern of life for God's people.
- Common witness, which found expression through the International Missionary Council whose first world conference, was held in Jerusalem in 1928.²⁰ Within the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches the concern for common witness and the unity of the churches has always been a priority. Authentic common witness presupposes respect and understanding for other traditions and confessions. What should be emphasized is that which is common and can be done together, rather than the barriers which separate. Even when apparently irreconcilable differences remain on certain issues, the truth should be spoken in love (Eph. 4:15), for the building up of the church (Eph. 4:12), rather than for giving prominence to one's position over against that of others. There is more that unites the churches than separates them. These unifying elements should be looked for in building up witness in unity.²¹

This conference, aimed at promoting effective missionary methods and avoiding the scandal of competing Christian claims in the missions fields, marked the beginning of Protestant efforts to address some of the challenges outlined above.

In 1921, the International Missionary Conference emerged. In 1925 at Stockholm, the first Life and Work²² Conference considered international relations and social and economic life from a Christian perspective. In

¹⁷ Kasomo Daniel, Ombachi Nicholas, Musyoka Joseph, Naila Napoo, (2012), Historical Survey of the Concept of Ecumenical Movement its Model and Contemporary Problems, *International Journal of Applied Sociology*, no. 2, p. 48

¹⁸ *Ibidem*

¹⁹ Andrew Kirk, (1994) *Missio Dei; Missio Ecclesiae, Contemporary Issues In Mission*, Editor, J. Andrew Kirk, Published by The Department of Mission, Selby Oak Colleges, England, p. 3

²⁰ Michael Kinnamon, (1997), *The Ecumenical Movement An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices Second Edition*, WCC Publications, Geneva, p. 14

²¹ Towards common witness, (1997), A call to adopt responsible relationships in mission and to renounce proselytism, available at www.oikoumene.org, pdf.

²² The origin of the Life and Work Movement dates back to a meeting hastily arranged in London in August 1914. This was just before the outbreak of WW I. After the war, Life and Work Movement was formed officially in 1930. Its motto was "doctrine divides and service unites." On paper it sounds very good but in reality the delegates realized that theological differences particularly over what the "kingdom of God" means cannot be easily swept aside. Furthermore some delegates belonging to the Faith and Order Movement were fearful that social order (or applied Christianity) might take precedence over doctrines in achieving church unity.

the history of 20th century Christian ecumenism, the Life and Work movement represents the attempt of Protestant and Orthodox churches to reach consensus on the church universal's practical role in society.

Social work in big cities such as London and Berlin led eventually to the Life and Work movement (Stockholm, 1925), whose creation was contributed to by the peace and friendship work of the German and British, and also the French, churches (the founding of the World Alliance for Friendship between the Churches occurred in 1914)²³.

The planners of the conference, all Protestants, desired a more ecumenical presence at the conference and thus had invited both Catholics and Orthodox to participate, though in the end they only managed to secure Orthodox participation²⁴.

The general concern of those within the Life and Work movement was to address how the churches might together address issues in society, and thus the topics of the conference included the following: the general obligation of the church in the light of God's plan for the world²⁵.

A central role had been played by the Scandinavian churches, led by the Archbishop of Stockholm²⁶, Nathan Soderblom²⁷, he made strenuous efforts to call conferences of churchmen and, through their influence, of statesmen before and during World War I to head off that conflict and then to shorten it.

For Nathan Soderblom it was clear that the need for a united Christian response to the international problems was too great to await the day when the various Christian churches would be united in confession. It was equally clear that it was necessary for the churches, and not individual Christians acting on their own behalf, to work together toward a unified response to the social problems. At the Conference, Nathan Soderblom, chaired the key section „The Unity of Christendom and the Relation Thereto of Existing Churches.”²⁸

Without minimizing the significant matters of dogma and confession that separated the churches, Life and Work sought to achieve cooperation among diverse national Christian Traditions in their social praxis²⁹.

Although the postwar tension and atmosphere of recrimination between former enemies seemed an almost insurmountable obstacle, he succeeded in calling and leading a preliminary meeting at Geneva in 1920³⁰, and culminated in two world councils: one at Stockholm in 1925, and another at Oxford, England in 1937.

In between, a loosely constructed Continuation Committee, and then a formally constituted Council for Life and Work, maintained the ideals of the movement. Its formal end came in 1938 when it was incorporated into the preliminary founding stages of the World Council of Churches.

In 1925, two years before the meeting of the Faith and Order Movement convened at Lausanne, a Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work met in Stockholm to address social issues together. This was a result of years of effort to get the churches involved. It was the first international ecumenical conference whose delegates had all been appointed by their respective communions (including a strong presence of Orthodox churches).

As the very name of the conference indicates, Life and Work emphasized the translation of Christian views, convictions, and outlooks into the life of the home, society, the state, the nations, and the world.

The Stockholm report shows that the conference grappled with a wide variety of hard social, political, and ideological problems against a background of disillusionment which resulted from the undemocratic sequels of a war fought to save democracy.³¹

²³ Kasomo Daniel, Ombachi Nicholas, Musyoka Joseph, Naila Napoo, p. 48

²⁴ R. David Nelson, Charles Raith II, (2017), *Ecumenism, A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury Academic, p. 121

²⁵ *Ibidem*

²⁶ Gilbert A. Thiele, (1956), *The World Council of Churches*, Concordia Theological Monthly, May, p. 358

²⁷ Nathan Söderblom, (born Jan. 15, 1866, Trönö, Sweden, died July 12, 1931, Uppsala), Swedish Lutheran archbishop and theologian who in 1930 received the Nobel Prize for Peace for his efforts to further international understanding through church unity.

²⁸ Eewing Fahlbusch, Jan Milic Lochman, John Mbiti, Jaroslav Pelikan, Lukas Vischer, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, David B. Baret, (2003), *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Eerdmans.Brill Ed., vol. 5, originally published in German, 1986, used for this article english translation, p. 108

²⁹ The general attitude of the participants was that various social issues could be addressed despite doctrinal division, in fact these social ailments could work to bring together churches in a way theological deliberation could not.

³⁰ Gilbert A. Thiele, *op. cit.* p. 48

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 359

At the opening session of the 1925 Conference, King of Sweden welcomed the 610 delegates from the thirty-seven nations³² by pointing out to them the importance of their work. These figures in themselves illustrate the substantial weight that Protestant carried in the early years of Life and Work.

It was invoked the memory of the Ecumenical Synod of Niceea, the need of unity was heard again and the Nicene Creed was recited in Greek at the final ceremonial held in Uppsala Cathedral by the Archbishop Soderblom, these echoes heard in Stockholm 1600 after the original ecumenical council provide an important clue for understanding the vision and the reality of the ecumenical movement for Life and Work.

The Stockholm conference purpose was to explore the basis for uniting the divided churches of Protestant and Orthodox Christianity in areas of common practical work in the modern age.

The world that Stockholm conference addressed was the modern, industrial world of European civilization. Industry and technology had continued to expand at a rapid pace, creating new forms of social dislocation and conflict. At the same time rapid social changes had resulted in what many perceived to be growing moral problems in the Western world, moral issues the churches were proving ineffective in addressing. But above all else, the devastating memory of modern warfare witnessed by Europe on the massive scale between 1914 and 1917, created an unprecedented challenge for Stockholm 1925 Conference³³.

The goal of the conference was to provide an opportunity for churches in the world devise more effective means of addressing these issues by acting together. The weaknesses of divided Christendom had become apparent to those who were concerned for the witness of the churches in the modern Western world³⁴.

The Christianity have often found it easier to respond to the needs of contemporary society than to resolve the internal divisions within what the Holy Spirit founded at the Pentecost as one Church of Jesus Christ³⁵.

Christian mission is primarily and ultimately God's mission - the *missio Dei*. It is centred in the loving and eternal purpose of the triune God for humankind and all of creation, revealed in Jesus Christ. Central to God's mission is the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit, who continues the mission of Christ through the church and remains the source of its missionary dynamism³⁶.

Participating in God's mission is an imperative for all Christians and all churches³⁷, not only for particular individuals or specialized groups. It is an inner compulsion, rooted in the profound demands of Christ's love, to invite others to share in the fullness of life Jesus came to bring (cf. John 10:10)³⁸.

CONCLUSION

The Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work, Stockholm, 1925, tried to find a common basis for the churches to renew their efforts on behalf of peace and justice, and can be seen as a response to the inability of the churches to speak an effective word of peace during the First World War, a conflict which was, in effect, a Christian civil war.

Europe had experienced the First World War, the social consequences of industrialisation and economic difficulties. All agreed that the church could not be silent, for that reason the motto of the Stockholm conference was "Doctrine divides, service unites."

From this evolving story of Life and Work, under its various names, it is readily apparent that all attempts to bring Christians together from different backgrounds to exercise their common social responsibility soon run into tensions.

Consequently the message of the Stockholm Conference begins with a call to repentance. The churches were invited to dedicate themselves anew to the task of witnessing to the power of the Gospel in all realms of life, in industry, society, politics and international relations, and „the world is too strong for divided Church.”

It makes it clear that Christian action in and for the world is an integral part of the witness of the church to the

³² Marianne Jehle-Wildberger, (2013), *Adolf Keller, ecumenist, world citizen, philanthropist*, translated by Mark Kyburz with John Peck, The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, p. 94

³³ Dale T. Irving, (1994), *Hearing many voices, Dialogue and Diversity in the Ecumenical Movement*, University Press on America, p. 83

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 84

³⁵ Eewing Fahlbusch, Jan Milic Lochman, John Mbiti, Jaroslav Pelikan, Lukas Vischer, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, David b. Baret, (2003), p. 273

³⁶ *Towards common witness*, (1997), www.oikoumene.org

³⁷ *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, (2007), Ordination Service: Study Edition (London: Church House Publishing), The Ordination and Consecration of a Bishop, p 55.

³⁸ *Towards common witness*, (1997), www.oikoumene.org

Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Stockholm Conference awakened the conscience of the churches to challenges arising from modern industrial society. Christian faith and economics are not two separate categories. The conference stressed the "necessity of applying the spirit and teaching of Christ to economic and industrial life". The Gospel addresses all realms of life. Economic activity should not be undertaken for the sake of personal profit only. Industry "should be conducted for the service of the community".

The 1925 Stockholm Conference, and Life and Work Council to which it gave rise, were not the first international and interconfessional attempts to organize a united church response to the pressing social issue the day.

Earlier organizations such as the Associated Councils of Churches in the British and German Empires for Fostering Friendly Relations between the Two Peoples, and the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches had paved the way for developing better understanding among the national churches of Europe and North America during the first decades of the century.

The center of the ecclesiology of the Mission is the person of Jesus Christ, who connects the history with the eternity, showing to us and affirming to ourselves that He is the way and the truth (John 14,6), the Resurrection and the Life (John 13,8).

God's truth and love are given freely and call for a free response. Free will is one of the major gifts with which God has entrusted humans. God does not force anyone to accept God's revelation and does not save anyone by force. On the basis of this notion, the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches (in process of formation) developed a definition of religious freedom as a fundamental human right. This definition was adopted by the WCC First Assembly in Amsterdam (1948), and at the suggestion of the WCC's Commission of the Churches on International Affairs it was subsequently incorporated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes the freedom to change his/her religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, in public or in private, to manifest his/her religion or belief, in teaching, practice, worship and observance."³⁹

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³⁹ *Ibidem*

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