

PREFACE

"Unbelief in the churches," was the answer given by a Christian leader out of the third world when asked what is the major fact in the church at present. The answer came as a surprise. The presence and role of unbelief inside the church in the West is well known. The thought that it had become so in the churches produced by the missionary movement was unexpected.

This assessment of the condition of the world church led the committee of the World Methodist Council responsible for the Fourth Oxford Institute on Methodist Theological Studies to choose the theme: *The Living God*.

The four Institutes combine in their themes a significant base for theological self-reflection: "Biblical Theology and Methodist Doctrine" (1958), "The Doctrine of the Church" (1962), "The Finality of Christ" (1965) and now "The Living God" (1969). Each of these has been dealt with by approximately one hundred persons from all parts of the Methodist world. The Institutes are held in residence at Lincoln College, Oxford. Principal A. Raymond George, co-chairman, with the editor, of the Institute, served as warden in 1969. Plans are under way for the Fifth Institute in 1973. The selection of the theme will be an effort to continue to add significantly to the corpus of theological discussion in world Methodism.

In the years encompassed by these Institutes the structural relationships of the various Methodisms of the world have shifted substantially. These shifts raise the question as to what it is that will in fact hold the Methodist family together in true fellowship. The answer is found not in theological peculiarities, but in theological community. In an era of autonomy of the churches historically related to British and American Methodisms the need for this theological Institute is ever more evident.

These papers were presented by three U.S. scholars, three from Britain, and two from Asia. One is from the distinguished Anglican theologian Dr. Ian T. Ramsey, the Bishop of Durham. A very useful summary and evaluation of the total movement of

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the theme through all the papers was given by Principal Rupert E. Davies. It is here offered as an introduction. It will serve the reader as an extraordinarily helpful summary of the whole.

Again, as with *The Doctrine of the Church* and *The Finality of Christ*, Abingdon Press makes these papers available to the church. They are offered as a living memorial to the Wesleyan beginnings at Oxford and as a participation in the ecumenical discussions of "The Living God."

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