

World Council of Churches  
Education and Ecumenical Formation

July 2006



Igor Sperotto/WCC

## *Mutirão*

*Mutirão* is a Brazilian word with indigenous roots meaning a meeting place and an opportunity to work together for a common purpose. The **Mutirão** at the assembly offered workshops and seminars, cultural events and exhibits to all participants



This biannual journal aims to encourage sharing and cooperation among all who are working for the renewal of the churches through programmes of ministerial formation. All correspondence regarding MINISTERIAL FORMATION should be sent to the address below. Submission of relevant articles, reports and news is welcomed. Items in this journal do not necessarily reflect the views of the WCC and its programme on Ecumenical Theological Education.

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## *A TRIBUTE – Rev. Dr. LEWIN WILLIAMS*

In the course of preparing this issue, we received the sad news of the death of Prof. Lewin Williams, President of the United Theological College of the West Indies (UTCWI) on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2006. I had come to know Williams (and his wife Joyce) well since 2000 as a member of "Pan-African Seminar of Religious Scholars on Religion and Poverty" (2000-20004). I thought the best way to honour him is to share with you a few extracts from tributes that have been sent to UTCWI. We will all miss his "Quiet Smile"!

In the recent death of Rev. Dr. Lewin Williams the Caribbean church community has lost a very gracious and dedicated theologian. As with the death of those who are neither rich nor powerful, there is a temptation to quickly pass over the event, especially as we in Jamaica have become so accustomed to death and dying. In 1994, Peter Lang Publishing Company released what has become Dr. William's *opus magnum*, under the title Caribbean Theology. The publication is significant because it is probably the most comprehensive Caribbean theological reflection we have received in the last decade. It was not always the case that the realities of the Caribbean featured in the way that people in the region reflected on their faith. In fact, it is quite the case still today that churches and religious communities rely on what is happening abroad, especially America, to dictate the character and content of their Christian life and action. (Livingstone Thompson is a Jamaican theologian living and working in the Republic of Ireland).

As deputy president, he had special responsibility for community events and community relations and used his unique relational style to pull the community together at times of potential conflict, and in keeping the various constituencies working together in the interest of community. Often this meant serious negotiation between various competing interests, but he was always up to the task, even when it meant having meetings at all hours of the night. Lewin had an unhurried style about him which was reflected in the way he walked and in the way he talked. It seems that Lewin never wasted words in the kind of verbosity to which we Caribbean people can be given at times. Each sentence was carefully crafted and when it was offered had some significance and weight to it. This was evident in interpersonal exchanges, in meetings, but also in his sermons. Lewin was a person of principle. He was not one given to following causes blindly and so would be willing to state a contrary position and to disagree with judicatory and other constituted authorities, whether in his denomination or in the college. In this regard, he was not afraid of taking these positions even if they ran the risk of disturbing friendships and loyalties. (Bishop Howard Gregory, former President of UTCWI).

Students at various levels on campus of the UTCWI will remember their 'Chief Rabbi' as an unusually approachable Chief Executive, Lecturer, Tutor and Faculty Adviser. He was available at all times on any issue. Professional colleagues will not easily forget his openness, willingness to listen and disciplined approach to learning and the sharing of information. Members of the administrative staff will remember a "boss" whose presence inspired them to do their best for the Servant Lord. President Williams was an excellent example of the leader who motivates by convincing followers that the leader is himself/herself a fellow worker who understands and therefore cares and shares without reservation. (Public Theology Forum - a grouping of local ministers of religion from different denominations).

In working with both of them (with his wife Joyce) in the "Pan-African Seminar of Religious Scholars on Religion and Poverty" (2000-20004) their experience of working together as a team soon became apparent to all of us. Among his many attributes was the virtue of friendship which emanated from his marital relationship with Joyce outwards to embrace all the rest of us. It is unusual to find a husband-wife team working so well together over such a long period of time. Their joint ministry was altogether noteworthy. Most important, all of their relationships were rooted in and expressive of the faith he sought to explicate in his significant ground-breaking academic work entitled, "Caribbean Theology." (Prof. Peter Paris, Princeton Theological Seminary, NJ, USA).

## **Ministerial Formation - 107**

### **July 2006**

#### **VOICES FROM BRAZIL**

This issue of *Ministerial Formation* is long overdue. I have received several inquiries if it will ever see the shelves of libraries of theological institutions and faculties. I apologize for the lateness to all our readers and those responsible for ensuring that it has been received in the library. There are a number of reasons why we are this late but I would rather not bore you with explanations. Instead I hope that you will find these articles enriching, maybe some things will surprise you, and above all inspiring. These are voices from a small group of theological students and their professors who managed to attend the 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of WCC held in Porto, Alegre, 14<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2006.

I am grateful to S. Wesley Ariarajah, a fellow sojourner in the ecumenical movement and ecumenical theological education, for hinting to me that the students he supervised at the Assembly from Drew University School of Theology, Madison, N.J., USA, have written articles worth the issue of *MF*. Certainly, this put me in a dilemma because I was in the process of collecting articles from a number of theological professors who attended the Assembly. I consoled myself by thinking that I could use all the papers but that was not to happen. Even the Drew papers were more than I could accommodate in this issue. This means I have more apologies to make to all those who sent their reflections but we were unable to include them. For the remaining Drew papers, Wesley came up with a brilliant idea of using extracts, which we have put in boxes. To all contributors, thank you very much.

A word about the last article by Rudolf von Sinner, which is a report on **the Ecumenical Congress 2006: Mission and Ecumenism in Latin America**. Yes, there was another way of creating space for intensive ecumenical formation for theological students and professors. As the report attests, an idea was shared and Rudolf and his colleagues at São Leopoldo Seminary, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, literally “run with it”. Through collaborative leadership a historical event was unfolding at São Leopoldo as much as another one (WCC 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly was the first to be held in Latin America) was taking place at Porto Alegre, Brazil. I am grateful to Rudolf and his colleagues for all that they did to make the Congress a big success. It is my hope and prayer that these two different ways of offering ecumenical formation to theological students during the Assembly are inspirational and empowering.

Space does not allow me to tell how else ecumenical formation was offered at the Assembly rather than to say that the delegates strongly affirmed ecumenical formation as one of the major programmatic work of WCC in the next seven years. In light of this the Geneva staff, and in particular those assigned to **Ecumenical and Faith Formation** are working hard to see how best to implement the Assembly mandates. We plan to stay connected with our readers despite any changes that may occur in the process.

Once more, I regret the lateness of this issue and not having enough space for all the articles.

Nyambura Njoroge  
Programme Executive  
Ecumenical Theological Education

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## A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

**S. Wesley Ariarajah**

In 1997 I was invited by the Drew University School of Theology to take the position of professor of Ecumenical Theology. I readily accepted it because I thought that by that time I had “bagged” enough ecumenical experience to pass on my ecumenical commitment and enthusiasm to new batches of students. In fact, for someone coming from the small island of Sri Lanka, I had been overly privileged to have quite a variety of ecumenical exposures, especially through participation in the work of the World Council of Churches. I had been a member of the Faith and Order Commission for over ten years, and was the commission’s vice moderator between the Nairobi and Vancouver assemblies; I had given the staff leadership to the Joint Working Group between the WCC and the Vatican; I had been involved in the ministry of interfaith dialogue locally, and eventually led the Dialogue program of the WCC as its director for over 10 years; I was assigned to be the secretary of the worship life of the Vancouver assembly, which started a whole new tradition of Ecumenical Worship across traditions and cultures; I had been the advisor to the study on ‘Community of Women and Men in the Church;’ and at the time I was invited to Drew, I was in the fourth year as the deputy general secretary of the WCC. “Surely,” I told myself, “I am equipped to take on this position and make something of it.” Little did I realize then that soon I would be cut down to size, and learn new lessons about the challenges facing anyone who wishes to be involved in ecumenical formation at the local level.

Arriving at Drew, I first realized that there had been no teaching position in “Ecumenical Theology” and that I was to begin this as a new stream within Division on Theology and Philosophy. Even though Drew is one of the most progressive seminaries in the country, and its professors had been deeply involved in global ecumenism between the 50s and 60s, today, with notable exception of a few professors and deans, hardly anyone was aware of the work of the WCC, its programs and publications. I could not find a single WCC publication in the Book Shop. For most students, ecumenism meant “Protestant –Roman Catholic Relations” or “Christian-Jewish Relations” in the USA. Many people were aware of the existence of WCC, but their images had been shaped by persistent anti-WCC propaganda in the USA during the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. It has often been said that the WCC lost the Academies in the 60s. Now the truth of the statement was glaring at me.

It was clear that a course on “Ecumenical Theology,” “History of the Ecumenical Movements,” or “Major Themes in Ecumenical Thought” etc. would attract very few students, if any, especially from a new professor whom none of them had known or heard about! I had to find innovative ways of promoting the ecumenical formation for which all my previous experiences had not prepared me in any direct way. I was where Paul was in his letter to the Philippians; having given all his impressive credentials to be an apostle, he had to say, “I count them as rubbish” so that he might “know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”

Paul’s language is strong because he was in a polemical setting. I cannot be grateful enough for the rare, diverse and precious ecumenical experiences I have had through the WCC. Yet, I had to begin from the very beginning, and slowly build up commitment among successive batches of students to ecumenical and interfaith relations; nothing could be taken for granted. It is a struggle for students as well; in a culture where individualism, denominationalism, sectarianism, and religious fundamentalism are on the rise, and where ‘success’ is measured in numbers and wealth of the congregation, ecumenism was a luxury. Happily, Drew, as a progressive seminary, has a composition of its faculty, staff, and students that is thoroughly ecumenical; it is strongly committed to justice issues; and the leadership was supporting every effort to bring about ecumenical formation of the students who passed through its portals. Yet we needed something more to make the necessary impact at least on some part of the student body.

### **The gift of the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly**

The 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the WCC meeting in Brazil was therefore a great gift. Initially my heart sank when I found that the Assembly would meet during Semester time. Would the students sacrifice other classes to attend the assembly? The second disappointment came with the knowledge that, in view of the emphasis on a major youth event, there would be no “Seminarians Course” held in many of the earlier assemblies. The only possibility was for me to organize a course during the assembly, and I had thought about 10 students might sign up, partly because they would have to bear all the costs of attending the assembly. To my surprise there was a rush for registration and I had to put the limit at 30 students. Eventually 34 of us attended the assembly.

### **Preparation and participation**

All attending the assembly from Drew had to participate in a Pre-departure Course. The following subjects were dealt with in this course through reading assignments, lectures, video clips and discussions:

- The Ecumenical Movement. Its origins, history and manifestations.
- The World Council of Churches. Its history, its programs, and the challenges it faces in our day.
- The WCC Assembly. The past assemblies, the structure and functions of an assembly; the structure and programs and related events of the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly.
- The theme and sub themes of the assembly. Major issues that would attract the attention of the assembly.
- *Mutiraos*: Introduction to the Mutiraos, how to select programs, the nature of participation of accredited visitors.
- Introduction to Brazil, its peoples, cultures and issues (self-study through Internet).

In addition to Marlin VanElderden and Martin Convey’s volume, *Introducing the World Council of Churches*, each student also had all the assembly preparatory volumes and materials at his or her disposal.

At the Assembly itself students followed a four-track program.

- Every day the students met for an hour and a half after the Morning Prayers to discuss their experiences of the previous day and to seek clarifications, followed by a presentation on an issue by one of the ecumenical personalities at the assembly.
- They participated in all the Plenary Sessions that were open to Accredited Visitors.
- Each student, according to their interest in an issue, pre-selected a number of *Mutiraos* to attend, to participate, and to write about at the end of the assembly.
- They participated in assembly worship, cultural events, worship with local congregations, and in a specially organized sight seeing tour of Porto Alegre.

After the assembly, back at Drew, students attended an extended evaluation of the assembly, made a presentation to the Drew community on their experience in Brazil, and wrote 10-15 pages reflection paper on their experience, especially on a theme or the issue they had followed up through their participation in the Mutiraos.

At the end of the assembly all students, without exception, witnessed that the assembly had been a “life-changing experience” for them. I think that four factors, among others, stand out in making such a great impact on them:

- A new awareness of the cultural, confessional and theological plurality of the church universal. They had always known this intellectually. The assembly gave them the chance to experience it intensely and directly.

- A new consciousness of the breadth of issues dealt with within the ecumenical movement and the rare opportunity to meet, listen and interact with people who are directly affected by these issues.
- A new discovery of the potential of ecumenical worship and exposure to dimensions of worship previously unknown to them.
- A new sense of the discovery of what is meant by the word ‘ecumenical;’ a new sense of belonging to something larger, profound, and meaningful than they had imagined. Assembly for them was not another big event or conference but an experience that changed their life.

It reiterated the conviction long held within the WCC on ecumenical formation: There are many ways to bring about ecumenical formation, but it is experience that is at the heart of all ecumenical learning.

This issue of *Ministerial Formation* carries some of the reflections that were submitted by students some weeks after the assembly. The limitations of space prevent the publication of all the papers that were written, and the editor has used her discretion to choose some of them as illustrations of the way the assembly has brought about ecumenical formation among students. I am deeply grateful to my colleague and friend, Nyambura Njoroge, for giving the students the opportunity to share their reflections with the wider ecumenical community.

**I thought...that the assembly is not just a combination of activities and meetings. It is essentially a spiritual event in the authentic sense of the word. It seems to me that we need to focus on ecumenical collaboration as a Spiritual event when we gather (or invite to gather) also at the local level. The thirst for spirituality in our communities is evident in the number of seekers transferring from the mainstream to Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and to the mega-churches of the televangelist as well as to alternate spiritualities. Young people do not care about the minutia of doctrinal differences when they gather to work together, rather they focus on the joy of joint service and the concrete that together they have made a difference in the life of another. That joy overflows into their expressions of worship.**

(Sharon Warnock, Assembly participant from the DST)



## *I CAME, I SAW, I...*

Lillie Ferrell

### *I came*

to one location in Brazil to experience both the universality and diversity of Christianity from 7 continents and various islands.

I came

From my own limited and confined world, steeped in traditions, doctrines, and beliefs, that formed my own religious cocoon.

I came

To participate, to share, to listen, to learn, to dialog, to give, to receive, to experience and to exchange.

I came

with hopeful expectations, seeking ecumenism, seeking inter-faith dialog, seeking diversity, seeking understanding, seeking revelations.

I came

without a personal agenda or viewpoint to market to others but to listen and engage others and their ideas.

I came

without knowing what to expect but full of hopeful anticipation and bubbling excitement.

### *I saw*

Christianity as a *quilt* woven together by many different fabrics, colors and textures coming together with a theme, plea and prayer: “*God in your grace transform the world*’.

I saw

A “*United Nations of Christians*” from the around the world engaging in inter-faith dialog discussing how to transform the world.

I saw

A *rainbow* of Bishops, Cardinals, Priests, Reverends, Pastors, Laity and youth seeking to transform the world.

I saw

A *kaleidoscope* of Politicians, Christian activists, mediators, biblical scholars, theologians, and seminarians discussing tough topics and debating various viewpoints.

I saw

A *smorgasbord* of Christianity that included Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans and Reformed Church plus many other flavors of Christianity.

I saw

An *intricate roadmap* of several different roads with various twists and turns leading to the same heavenly destination.

### *I celebrated*

The commitment of these Christians to try to find the common bond which is the love of Jesus that united us all together.

I celebrated

The ethnic diversity, cultural variety, assortment of doctrines, dogmas and beliefs that were represented in several different languages.

I celebrated

The attempt made to combine worship services that showcased these differences and affirmed each other’s uniqueness in contributing to the Body of Christ.

I celebrated

The transcendence of Jesus that can manifest himself in numerous cultural, geographic and political environments.

I celebrated

Because I had witnessed a microcosm of Heaven!

### ***I considered***

Various doctrines, traditions, dogma, practices, and cultural experiences quite different from my own yet quite intriguing.

I considered

a Christian world of diversity but still somewhat unified in the foundation of Christ as we celebrated this wonderful variety.

I considered

The various viewpoints of Jesus as interpreted in different cultural environments and contextual settings.

I considered

How different this conference would have been had the participants focused more on the “*Great Commandment*” rather than the “*Great Commission*”.

I considered

Why the invisible Jesus in each of us ***was not more visible?***

I considered

What would Jesus say to his disciples gathered here? What activities and events had brought Jesus pleasure and what has caused Jesus much pain?

### ***I challenged***

Men and women chosen by God; to become genuine Ambassadors of Christ; by demonstrating the “*Fruit of the Spirit.*”

I challenged

Christian Activist to “*Be Still and Listen*” to others with the same openness that you demand as you promote your agenda.

I challenged

The leaders of the various Christian denominations, orders and sects to engage in conversations with the grassroots before speaking “*for*” them.

I challenged

Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Protestants to stop ignoring the rapid spread of Pentecostalism and to engage in open dialog with Pentecostals and Evangelicals.

I challenged

Christians who proclaim to love Jesus to demonstrate that same love to other Christians gathered at this assembly with different beliefs.

I challenged

Christians to look at the world through the lens of Christ first then maybe one size does not fit all, your way is not the only way and God exists outside your box!

### ***I called out***

To *Servants of God* to **serve** others to *transform the world* by **sharing**.

I called out

To *Lovers of God* to **love** others and *transform the world* by **Peaceful coexistence**.

I called out

To *People of God* to **respect** others and *transform the world* by **collaboration**.

I called out

To *Followers of Christ* to **listen** to others and transform by **communication**.

I called out

To *Teachers of Christ* to **teach** others and transform the world by **Godly Wisdom**.

I called out

To *Children of God* to **forgive** others and transform the world by **working together**.

I called out

To *Women of God* to **accept** others and transform the world by **cooperation**.

I called out

To *Men of God* to **embrace** others and transform the world by **commitment**.

### ***I cried***

Because I saw selfishness and egotism displayed throughout the assembly.

I cried

As I watched Christians push and shove each other to get to their destinations and show little regard and respect for others.

I cried

As I wondered what kind of examples were being set for our youth to follow while begging us to seek more understanding and becoming less demanding.

I cried

Because as Christians we have so far to go before we can demonstrate the kingdom of God here on earth and many seem interested in their own personal, social and historical agendas rather than God's agenda.

I cried

As I prayed for a real transformation of our own individual hearts before we can begin to *transform the world*.

I cried

As I returned to my own cocoon, richer in experience, wiser in knowledge, but disturbed in my spirit because the most important transformation begins with me!

***I came***

***I saw***

***I celebrated***

***I considered***

***I challenged***

***I called out***

***I cried!***

## INVOLVE ME AND I'LL UNDERSTAND

Wongee Joh

### *Storms in life*

We started our journey to Porto Alegre in the midst of a Northeast (USA) snow storm. The storm can present an image of what it means to be living in this changing world and the journeys we make as individuals and as communities. We did not “arrive” in Porto Alegre as anticipated or expected. We were required to make adjustments in our expectations. The journey to Porto Alegre was in of itself an experience within the microcosm of the Drew community. Traveling together had its own challenges of what it means to become a community. I realized that the WCC’s search for visible unity could not have been envisioned or undertaken without the audacity of hope received by faith given through God’s grace.

During our journey to Brazil, I doubted that as a Drew community, we demonstrated any signs that we were Christians and future church ministers. Many of us became impatient and intolerant. Traveling together, confronted with even small conflicts, brought out the worst and best in some of us. Throughout the journey, I realized that some of us are not that much different from my young children who in traveling together, whether it be a one hour trip or six hour trip, whines constantly, “Are we there yet?” This might not be that different in our spiritual journeys where we at times ask, “Are we there yet?”

The question of “Are we there yet?” can represent both existential and eschatological questions that we live out in our daily lives. We are called to live out who we are in Christ. How do we do this? We have different understandings of who we are as Christians and thus live it out differently as well. However, in a basic way, “we render out Christian faith into daily life, by living the gospel, the word of life, for the glory of God, as the people of God on a pilgrimage between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’”.<sup>1</sup> We live and journey in this “in-between” space of what is “already” and the “not yet”. In this journey, what do we encounter that we did not anticipate or expect? Practicing and encountering hospitality in the midst of these storms are essential to the transformational process. In the midst of storms in life, we journey together in relation to one another, building communities through practices of hospitality.

### **Practicing hospitality**

As Christians we are working out our salvation. Our own salvation can be understood as “hospitality”, an everlasting one that God has extended to us. In an eschatological vision, we have the symbol of God becoming both host and guest amongst us<sup>2</sup>. In practicing hospitality, we encounter God in new ways. The practice of hospitality requires patience and care. Hospitality means embracing the other in their “otherness”. Through practice of hospitality, we discover God anew. How much did this happen within the microcosm of our Drew community as we journeyed together? Did we leave our comfortable racial clicks to encounter the “other”? Definitely, there were changes and transformations that took place in spite of tensions within our Drew community. Experiences of living in the tensions and ambiguities of “in-between” spaces as Christians can help us to acknowledge each other’s thirsts and work towards offering each other living water. Our journeys are always filled with grace. Journeys are beginnings and endings filled with hope in which we are to respond with the same gifts that we have received ourselves along the way.

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima, ed. *Grace in Abundance-Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Porto Alegre*, WCC Publications, 2005, p.34.

<sup>2</sup> *Programme Book: Ninth Assembly, Porto Alegre, February 2006*, WCC Publications 2005, p. 162.

### **WCC: journey on a river**

The journey of the WCC was illustrated as a journey on a river with convergences and mergers along different entry points. The illustrated historical journey of WCC displayed different themes with its significances and marked each assembly since 1948 in Amsterdam, Evanston, New Delhi, Uppsala, Nairobi, Vancouver, Canberra, and Harare and to the present day at Porto Alegre. Porto Alegre city sits at the mouth of the Guaíba River with access to the Atlantic coast. This river is full of life with the histories of immigrant people from Germany, Poland, Spain and Italy. Porto Alegre was the entry point in which I found myself with all those gathered at the Assembly flowing into this river leading to a larger body of water. In our convergence into this river – movement of life – we participate in redefining our understandings of the possibilities in our vision of church unity, and we find ourselves merging into deeper and wider ways.

Throughout our participation at the Assembly, I encountered and received the gifts of the people of Brazil. At the Latin America plenary, I saw and heard, “Where is God at work in Latin America?” Through entering into the stories of the people of Latin America, we were represented with the way of living and being, struggling and surviving, and dreaming and showing of where God is at work in Latin America (plenary on Latin America). We were invited to mobilize and stand in solidarity with Latin America. Although the whole richness and diversity of the people of Latin America was not shown, what we saw revealed and witnessed to us the resurrection that happens and is possible in and through people living in “liminal spaces”. Latin America witnesses to the transforming power of God’s grace, and we are called to bear the realities of the cross in Latin America together. Our commitments reveal the transformative power of God’s grace.

### **“A festa da vida- the feast of life”**

In seeing and hearing where God was at work in Latin America we were able to witness the different aspects of the theme for the Assembly, “God, in your grace, transform the world.” The logo, which was artistically presented, was a theological exploration of the theme, representing both the hand of God and a praying hand; creation and the cross; the spirit in the form of a dove; and the covenant rainbow in the background. Most importantly, the theme, “God in your grace, transform the world” is a prayer of intercession. This prayer is one of trust and hope in the fulfillment of the prayer that Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of his disciples, and it is on the basis of his prayer that the aim will be realized in ever-new ways. The theological richness of the theme continues to unfold as I continue to pray, “God, in your grace, transform our world”. In praying together at the assembly, it became clearer that the message of Jesus is the message for life. Samuel Kobia, WCC secretary general, shared in his understanding of the Portuguese phrase, “A festa da vida- the feast of life.” It is a message about living life in all its fullest. In his report Kobia stated that this “festa” comes to us in grace, a gift freely given for our partaking. He stated that grace could be understood as “God communicating God-self.” I believe that at the heart of the ecumenical movement is the hope that the fullness of Grace can be made visible through the unity of the church in the world. My participation at the Assembly made me receptive to engaging in the biblical invitation to the “holistic approach to justice, life and dignity, looking at human beings as stewards of the creation, and protecting, as God does with his grace, the whole creation with particular concern for the weakest member of the community”<sup>3</sup>.

### **Prayer gatherings**

The core of my participation at the Assembly was grounded in the morning and evening prayers. Liturgically, our participation at the prayers revealed how God works in and through all of us. It reminded me that our gatherings were not for an end in itself but for the sake of God. Our prayer gatherings provided us with time for spiritual reflection and experience of God’s grace that cannot be fully comprehended. We heard the cries of the people gathered from different places. We heard the cries from the poor in Latin America for shelter, food, and health. They cried out for justice.

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<sup>3</sup> *Programme Book*, p. 142.

We heard the cries of people from Africa for healing from diseases that threaten their very existence. We heard the cries from Asia as the marginalized and oppressed cried out for liberation. We heard the cries from the Pacific where the whole creation cries out for reconciliation. Our prayers invoked the Holy Spirit to come and transform us that we may be instruments of God's grace. Hearing these different cries of suffering shaped my understanding of *oikoumene* – “God's household of life, the whole inhabited earth” – and how together we are restored and transformed by God's gracious presence.

During the opening prayers, we also gave thanksgiving for the different gifts brought from Africa (stone), Asia (bell), Caribbean (sugar cane), Europe (reindeer calf skin), Latin America (fruits and Salvadorian cross), Middle East (Coptic icon), North America (grains of corn and wheat), and the Pacific (woven mat, stick map, and bowl). These gifts revealed our understanding that we do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by our contexts. These gifts representing the material side of our humanity. These are the gifts of life that we bring and shape our ecumenical formation and spirituality. Our experiences influence different initiatives, create a renewed quest and redefine our understandings of ecumenism and transformation.<sup>4</sup> In our prayers together, our hearts were humbled because we became aware of and acknowledged our human limitations, yet we were also renewed with the presence of the Holy Spirit that we could move forward trusting in the transformational power of God's grace. We were not only invited, but prepared and provided with all of the necessary things for our common work of witness.

### **Challenging plenary presentations**

The different presentations at the plenary sessions throughout the week offered us a sense of the current journey of the WCC embedded with tensions as well as celebrations. The plenary presentations on church unity, economic justice, overcoming violence, Christian identity and religious plurality, and Latin America challenged us to look at our contexts. We were invited to “reflect, react and respond” and to join in the WCC process which has been “challenged, expanded, reshaped, and re-articulated”. The plenary sessions on “Christian Unity”, presented by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, was personally the most engaging and meaningful for me. Christian identity is an issue that I found to be the most challenging to engage in dialogue with others. The Archbishop offered a refreshing speech on what it means to “identify ourselves”. I connected with his understanding that our Christian identity is “*leitourgeia*” and needs to be lived out. The presentation clarified for me the understanding of our Christian identity as “belonging in a place that Jesus defines for us” and “what it is that becomes possible in that place”.

The Archbishop stated that in this place, “you can see what you need to see to be at peace with God and with God's creation; and also that you need to be at peace with yourself, acknowledging your need of mercy and re-creation.” I understand that transformation needs to happen first with ourselves before transformation of our world can happen in and through us. This plenary session not only challenged us to “identify ourselves” but also to listen to how others identify themselves. We were reminded that we find ourselves on a “map of relations” and thus needed to understand our relatedness with one another. I can only know myself more clearly through my relation to another. In participating in ecumenical dialogue, I believe knowing ourselves in relation to another is critical to an honest and fruitful engagement.

### **Intimate conversations**

In addition to our plenary presentations, more intimate conversations were made possible in small groups in the ecumenical formation sessions. Our dialogues with people from other context than our own helped us rediscover our individual experiences of ecumenism. Our conversations re-enforced the idea that God transforms us first and helps us to understand that our hearts are changed through the process of being in relation with one another. Hearing each other to speech made us grow in our

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<sup>4</sup> *Programme Book*, p. 141.

understanding of each other and the different political, social, and economic landscapes in which our churches are called to act. In our conversations, our sharing became gifts to each other, and this process of open sharing affirmed unity amongst us. Specifically, my conversation with Martha Malangton from Papua New Guinea brought healing to both of us as we remembered and shared our journeys which included struggles with issues of violence against women and the different ways in which churches have legitimated these injustices within our different contexts. It was in talking about our different understandings about God's justice not as a retributive justice but as a transformative justice that we connected with each other and felt the presence of God's transforming grace.

### ***Mutirão* offerings**

Our participation at different *mutirão* offerings further created space for coming together for common purposes. However, attending *mutirão*, I realized that our purpose was not always conveyed in the same language and understandings. Participating at the various *mutirão* on globalization and economic justice was where I felt most frustrated. The level of our differences in our theological understandings, experiences, and perspectives, even though we all identified ourselves as Christians, made me realize the real challenge and struggle to become a visible sign of unity in our world. At the same time, it helped me to understand in a more concrete way the interconnectedness of us all and our relatedness to the whole world. I am better able to appreciate the theological understanding that as “human beings we are saved not from but *with* our world”.<sup>5</sup>

The most practical *mutirão* I attended was on “Hospitality and the Christian household: Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Pluralism”. In this class, we practiced new habits for building dialogue. I found this *mutirão* to be the most hands on and applicable in our context. We were taught to “increase our own intellectual, spiritual and emotional curiosity, listen to understand, speak to be understood, know where you stand, take risk to share why, respect different perceptions and opinions, avoid selective perceptions, practice objectivity, avoid pretending, relocate, amnesty, build alliances, allow for ambiguity, and look for common ground.” We participated in physical dialectic exercises related to practicing these habits. These exercises made us encounter the other and experience ways in which we can make authentic connections. It was helpful because I was able to immediately apply what I had learned as I attended other *mutirão*. It was a good change of pace, and I enjoyed this “how to” type of class. Changes in some of my basic habits to be more conscious and intentional in my behaviors, especially the importance of listening, had immediate impact on me and those that I interacted with throughout my participation at the Assembly. In addition, the most dynamic *mutirão* that I participated in was “Wider Ecumenism: a promise or a threat?” I listened to the dialogue between Christians, a Dalit from India, and a Hindu speaking from his perspective/context about Christians. I was challenged to look within our own Christian households and unity within and amongst ourselves. It was an encounter that enriched my own understanding of our Christian identity and something in my heart was moved as I listened to the “others”.

### **Exposure to Orthodox Churches**

The most significant encounter that I experienced at the Assembly was with the presence of the Orthodox and its traditions. My exposure to the Orthodox branch of our Christian identity had been limited to my exposures in church history class at Drew. What I found significant was how their presence influenced and shaped the WCC over its history. The change in the decision making process revealed a long waited change and the process of creating receptivity to bring the minority status of the Orthodox presence to fuller expression. Decision making through consensus is a change that has been shaped by the presence of the Orthodox and their minority status. The Orthodox reflection book (pg. 8) states their hopes that this process will “enhance the potential for the Council to find its true prophetic voice” and for greater accountability from the Orthodox participation. The change in the decision making process in WCC changes the ethos of the nature of

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<sup>5</sup> Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima, ed. *Orthodox Reflections*, p. 58.

the Council and how it embodies God's vision. Although my understanding of the whole process is limited, I grasped that it is another way in which WCC opened itself up to risking newness.

### **Conclusion: lessons learned!**

The Assembly theme and prayer: "God, in your grace, transform our world" means that we also need to be spiritually prepared for the road to reconciliation and healing is not an easy one. It involves listening, truth telling, repentance, forgiveness and sincere commitment to Christ and his justice. It includes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing. It involves healing in the midst of struggles for social, economic and ecological justice. It involves reconciling communities and churches in conflict. It involves nurturing congregations seeking renewal. It involves proclaiming and testifying to the gospel of transforming grace where people are desperately looking for spiritual meaning. It lives in the tension of the coming of God's reign as "already here" and "yet to come", but with the assurance that all true healing comes from God.

Mercifully, we returned changed from who we had been from USA.. We participated in the creation of a "home" in the midst of our journeys together. We left Drew, in some ways, as strangers to one another. Yet through our journey with one another and encounters with others at the Assembly, I found myself having grown more to "become what you are."<sup>6</sup> It had been a creative journey we had shared together not of "just education and formation, but of trust and participation". Transformation happened. Boundaries had shifted or become more fluid. I experienced grace in my being in relation to all of creation and the joy in acknowledging that "*kata charin*".<sup>7</sup>

I left Porte Alegre (port of Joy) with joy in my heart because not only had I been reminded of my baptism with thanksgiving for God's grace but I had been gifted to participate in the Eucharistic vision of the world being reconciled and united in Christ. God has already prepared and provided us with a way. In God's grace, I continue to pray, "God, in your grace, transform our world". In praying, I continue to be transformed. I cannot comprehend all of God's grace but find myself sharing and called into ministries of those that I have encountered at the Assembly. What a grace filled opportunity and a call to responsibility. I can easily feel overwhelmed and burdened. God's expectations seem complex and not comprehensive. It feels at times that there is nowhere to begin. We wait actively through living out the freedom given to us through grace that in and through us, God's kin-dom may be manifested. We wait with patience and testify to what is possible. In our worship and living, we witness to what we have experienced of grace by living toward Jesus' command that "they may all be one". We "journey joyfully on the way to the future which is nothing but the fulfillment of the kin-dom of God."<sup>8</sup> Praise the Lord!

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<sup>6</sup> Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima, ed. *Orthodox Reflection*, p.31.

<sup>7</sup> Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima, ed. *Orthodox Reflections*, p.14.

<sup>8</sup> Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima, ed. *Orthodox Reflections*, p. 63.



## DISCOVERING EDAN

Sharon Burniston

### First encounter with EDAN

In this article I will share my encounter with Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) at the Assembly.<sup>9</sup> The theological understandings presented by this group, not only informed and enriched my participation as a disabled person, but also challenged me to apply theological and hermeneutical constructs as I attended plenary and *mutirão* offerings on other topics.

At the 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the WCC held in Harare, Zimbabwe, several people with disabilities were invited as special advisors to the assembly. Their collective persistent voice led to the establishment of the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN). Ideas were formed for this special group sponsored by the WCC that would offer consistent support and advocacy for people with disabilities. The National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK) that already had a desk for Persons with Disabilities agreed to provide staff time for the coordination of EDAN. The first Consultation of EDAN under the sponsorship of WCC was held in 1999 in Nairobi, Kenya. The concept of the organization was formally institutionalized and a formal mission statement, purpose and goals were drafted and adopted. The mission statement of EDAN reads :

#### Mission

To support the work of individuals, churches and non-church organizations concerned with issues affecting disabled people globally.

#### Purpose

To advocate for a just and inclusive community by creating a network of people with disabilities as a distinctive ecumenical contribution to new models of being a church.<sup>10</sup>

EDAN is a growing organization within WCC. Lack of funding and the dispersal of its members all over the globe have frustrated many of its members; however that has not diminished their resolve. My own experience with EDAN at the Assembly is perhaps reflective of both the best and the worst EDAN has to offer. As a visually impaired person, who notified the WCC of my disability before the conference, none of my needs were met or even addressed. There were absolutely no large print materials available and I did not even know of EDAN's existence before the Assembly. As I attempted to find the EDAN room, WCC information booth attendants could never give me clear directions about where the room was located. I was able to manage throughout the conference using the "small-print" material given to me because my economic status has allowed me to buy many expensive technologies. I was told at the information booth, however, that there had been several requests for large print material.

Once found, however, the EDAN contingent encouraged and welcomed me to the Ecumenical Conversation, which was supposed to be reserved for official WCC delegates. Several busy EDAN delegates and consultants took time out of their schedules to converse and have lunch with me. I was even invited to a special celebration dinner one evening. While I observed a lack of organization in EDAN, the people of EDAN certainly practiced what they preached in providing a warm, inclusive environment. As the room full of disabled persons at the celebration dinner spontaneously broke into "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" the Christian commitment of this group could not be questioned.

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<sup>9</sup> For the history of WCC and Persons with Disabilities see <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/hist.html>

<sup>10</sup> *Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network: From Harare to Porto Alegre*, World Council of Churches Publishing, (Nairobi, Kenya, 2006), 6.

Arne Fritzson, one of EDAN's founders, put it best in his comments to the group that evening, "Remember that EDAN was born in Harare. Now it is an eight-year-old child. By the next assembly EDAN will be a teenager, and the assembly after that it will be a young adult. Please stay with us and help us matter."

### Theological Considerations

EDAN is blessed with theologians whose scholarship is deep and challenging on many levels. The conversations, articles and *mutirão* were all informed by the WCC Interim Statement "A Church of All and for All." This document is not limited to wheelchair ramps and large-print bulletins but instead it attempts to introduce hermeneutical and theological constructs that shape the churches' attitudes towards people with disabilities.

"A Church of All and for All" was written as a three-year process, edited and revised many times. Many scholars and theologians, most of who are disabled, contributed to the process. In August 2003, the WCC Central Committee accepted the statement and commended it to all member churches for study, deliberation and action.

In the preface to the Statement Samuel Kabue writes, "The Statement is interim in that it is an ongoing process. It is a part of a continuous journey in search of a theological understanding...It is not a comprehensive document, but offers pointers and insight on major theological themes."<sup>11</sup> The Statement is broken into five sections: Hermeneutical issues, *Imago Dei*, Healing and Forgiveness, Giftedness, and a Church for All. Pre-Assembly events, ecumenical conversations and *mutirão* sponsored by EDAN can also be discussed within these categories.

### Definitions and Hermeneutical Issues

One young Syrian woman who works with the mentally disabled in her country spoke passionately in the first ecumenical conversation on disabilities held on February 16, 2006. She expressed distress at the need for the conversation to even exist. She disliked the term "disabled" and wondered why we need to label people.

John Naude, one of EDAN's founders, responded that indeed labels can be destructive, but they can also be viewed positively as disabled persons claim their identity as a political force. There is strength and support to be found in claiming one's identity, as African-Americans found in the Black Power movement of the 1960's. He used this analogy to explain how social constructs set groups apart, but before those barriers can be broken down, they must be named and examined.

In his power point presentation entitled "Barriers," delivered as part of the second ecumenical conversation on February 17, 2006, Fritzson discussed the need to redefine words such as impairment, disability, handicap, health and sickness. A good example of his concern can be found in the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of Impairment as "any *loss* or *abnormality* of psychological or physiological or anatomical structure or function." WHO defines disability as "Any restriction or lack resulting from an impairment of ability to perform any activity in the manner or within the range considered *normal* for a human being." Fritzson prefers these definitions: "*Impairments*: lacking all or part of a limb or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body. *Disability*: the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation of the mainstream of social activities."<sup>12</sup>

The Interim Statement tackles the traditional view of disability as *loss* and disabled persons as weak objects for charity. The Statement challenges attitudes that regard disabled persons as less than fully

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<sup>11</sup> *A Church of All and for All*, World Council of Churches Publishing (Nairobi, Kenya, 2003), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Arne Fritzson and Samuel Kabue, *Interpreting Disability*, WCC Publications, 2004, ix-x.

human. By flipping definitions and viewing disability as a range of diversity that is by its very nature “normal”, the conversation starts to shift.

One might wonder why this discussion falls under the purview of the church. Why the church should be actively involved in what appears to be a social and political concern? The answer lies in the fact that biblical interpretations, theological doctrines and church programs outlined below have encouraged damaging attitudes towards persons with disabilities and have helped erect anthropological barriers that alienate them. Even more importantly, however, the church must become involved because, as Fritzson points out, Ephesians 2:14 says, “Christ came to tear down walls.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Imago Dei*

Just as the hermeneutical concerns of the Interim Statement can barely be touched upon in this paper, so too can this brief paper merely scratch the surface of its theological reflections on the image of God. While scripture claims that humans are made in God’s image, traditional church doctrine exegetically defines this in varying ways related to human reason and the soul. When closely examined however, deficiencies in these definitions can be discerned, and their damaging impact upon attitudes towards persons with disabilities is exposed. If reason is what makes us the image of God, does this make those with mental handicaps less than human? If our soul is the defining characteristic, how do we identify soul? This construct has led to condescending attitudes towards people with severe disabilities as their souls are said to be “peeping out through their eyes.”<sup>14</sup> The Interim Statement says, “The point here is that glib theological talk about being made in God’s image needs to be countered with a sensitivity to the *corporate* nature of that image, and the fact that *all* have fallen short of the glory (image) of God (Rom 3:23).”<sup>15</sup> New creative approaches to the doctrine of “image of God” are discussed in the Statement Gordon Cowans, EDAN Caribbean coordinator, challenged the group gathered for the first ecumenical conversation to reflect on the image of God being found not in the individual, but in human relations.

The Statement argues for *imago Dei* to be redefined in the following ways: “Christian theology needs to interpret the *imago Dei* from a Christological and soteriological (the saving work of Christ for the world) stand-point, which takes us beyond the usual creationist and anthropological perspectives. Christian theology needs to embrace a non-elitist, inclusive understanding of the Body of Christ as the paradigm for understanding the *imago Dei*. Without the full incorporation of persons who can contribute from the experience of disability, the Church falls short of the glory of God, and cannot claim to be in the image of God. Without the insight of those who have experience of disability, some of the most profound and distinctive elements of Christian theology are easily corrupted or lost.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Healing**

Christian scripture is full of healing stories and faith healing has been an integral part of the history of the church. The Interim Statement as well as EDAN activities during the Assembly spent a great deal of time breaking down myths and attitudes about healing that have, though fraught with good intentions, shamed disabled persons and have actually turned them away from the church as a healing institution. One poignant story was recounted during the first ecumenical conversation as a Brazilian woman in a wheelchair spoke of being told her faith was not strong enough because she could not walk. As this woman grew in her relationship with God, in spite of (rather than because of) her church, she finally came to an understanding that allowed her to respond to someone offering

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<sup>13</sup> Arne Fritzson, “Barriers” power point presentation, World Council of Churches 9th Assembly, February 17, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> *A Church of All and for All*, World Council of Churches Publishing (Nairobi, Kenya, 2003), 16.

<sup>15</sup> *A Church of All and for All*, World Council of Churches Publishing (Nairobi, Kenya, 2003), 17.

<sup>16</sup> *A Church of All and for All*, World Council of Churches Publishing (Nairobi, Kenya, 2003), 18.

her healing prayers that would allow her to walk, “Thank you very much, but that won’t be necessary, Christ has healed me quite nicely!”

Hermeneutics and Image of God are all wrapped up in the discussion about what it means to be healed vs. cured. “For disabled persons, healing does not first and foremost mean being cured. Rather, it has to do with restoration to and inclusion in the community.”<sup>17</sup> As technologies improve, transhumanist approaches to perfection of the body begin to abound. But economic and sociological considerations must be taken into account as we begin to search for the perfect body. Is this perfection meant only for the rich? Are those bodies that cannot be reformed into perfection unequal and disposable?<sup>18</sup>

The Interim Statement and EDAN discussions point to Gospel stories of healing; shifting the focus from the cure to Jesus’ healing that overcomes social and relational barriers. All persons healed by Christ join, or are taken back into, the community that has previously shunned them because of their condition. Even Jesus strives to emphasize healing as restoration of relationship with God and community, though the crowds of his day, as the crowds of today seem to prefer the flashy possibilities of miracle cures. Traditional church charity whose pitying attitude encourages condescending institutional structures is trumped by healing as restoration of dignity and community.

### **Gifts and Full Inclusion**

The Interim Statement contends that, “Being in God’s image does not just mean bearing this likeness, but the possibility of becoming as God intends.”<sup>19</sup> This means that each person’s life has purpose and must therefore not just be accepted, but celebrated. “This includes all people, whatever their abilities or impairments. It means that every human being is innately gifted and has something to offer that others need. This may be simply one’s presence, one’s capacity to respond to attention, to exhibit some sign of appreciation, and love for other people. Each has something unique to contribute (1 Cor 12:12-27) and should thus be considered as a gift.”<sup>20</sup>

Full inclusion does not just mean, toleration of people with disabilities as one allows them to sit at the back of the bus. The pre-assembly EDAN group spoke with Samuel Kobia, secretary general of WCC. While he praised their accomplishments “they asked in return, “Who in these abled, male-dominated churches are going to give up one of their precious delegates to the disabled? How do we get on programme and policy reference committees, let alone the central and executive committees, so that our concerns are taken seriously and your vaunted inclusion becomes a reality?”<sup>21</sup>

While the specific concerns of the disabled should be addressed, the need for the disabled voice within the WCC hierarchy is necessary, not for just for the sake of the disabled community, but for the sake of the WCC. Disabled theologians, scholars and activists have many underutilized gifts that could well serve the widespread missions of the WCC. Furthermore, the unique perspective of the disabled community can serve to inform the greater mission of the Church.

### **Disabled Perspective**

While sitting in on plenary sessions and workshops on a broad range of topics, I was constantly reminded of how the EDAN work could inform and clarify issues. One example of this was in the

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<sup>17</sup>“ WCC NEWS: Healing not the same as curing says disabled person,” *Worldwide Faith News*, May 11, 2005, <http://www.wfn.org/2005/05/msg00085.html>

<sup>18</sup>, “Disability Rights and Wrongs” *Worldwide Faith News*, February 14, 2006, <http://www.wfn.org/2006/02/msg00177.html>

<sup>19</sup> *A Church of All and for All*, World Council of Churches Publishing (Nairobi, Kenya, 2003), 23-24.

<sup>20</sup> *A Church of All and for All*, World Council of Churches Publishing (Nairobi, Kenya, 2003), 24.

<sup>21</sup>, “Disabled People Challenge WCC on inclusivity” *Transforma Mundo*, February 14, 2006, 7.

workshop lead by Wesley Ariarajah entitled “Wider Ecumenism: A Promise or a Threat?” Ariarajah suggested redefining koinona beyond its Christian boundaries, and seeing divine possibility in building a worldwide “healing community”. Discussion in the group became heated as one Indian Christian angrily denounced Hinduism for its treatment of the Dalits. A Hindu participant passionately defended his religion and accused Christians of hypocrisy when they “bribed” indigenous cultures with medical care and education in order to guarantee conversion. The third speaker, also a Hindu, commented on the fact that interfaith dialogue serves as a bridge that helps us all examine our religious conscience. As I listened to this exchange, I could not help but reflect on the EDAN discussions of healing vs. curing. So often in interfaith dialogue we are concentrating on curing the “ills of the infidels.” But as we perceive of healing as restoration of God’s intended world, where all individuals and communities are treated with respect and dignity, a new awareness of the “healing” dimension of interfaith dialogue begins to emerge. I couldn’t help but think about EDAN discussion of *imago Dei* when I listened to plenary and workshop on the topic of “Christian Ecumenism”. Can redefining our concepts of bodily perfection also redefine our expectations of the perfect “Body of Christ?” As we consider the image of God being found in relations and community, can we see the image of God more clearly in our relations with our Christian brothers and sisters, rather than worrying about which denomination projects that image more truly. A poem that was placed on the blackboard of the second ecumenical conversation kept coming back to me:

“THEM”	“US”
Where do I fit in?	
If I am one of “them,” they are one of “us”	
If I am one of “us,” who are “they?”	
Being one of “us” is only half	
I miss “them”	
Only when I am one of “them”	
I can be part of the complete “us”	
I know both “them” and “us”	
How do I dare to become one of “them” to become one of “us”	
	(Simone Poorthan Feb/12/06)

As one moves away from solely applying this poem to the disabled person and begins to broaden one’s view, it shades the ecumenical discussion of what it means to be the body of Christ.

## Conclusion

The work of EDAN is only beginning as the organization attempts to inform theological understandings and advocate for the rights of the disabled. The WCC will not be a whole body until it examines and confronts its own expectations and definitions of body, informed by the Interim Statement. The WCC must include disabled persons at all levels if it wishes to represent the complete Body of Christ. But it is not only EDAN that can inform the WCC. The whole WCC and interfaith dialogues also circle back to support EDAN. As he addressed the Drew community about Islam on our last day, South African Imam Rashied Omar said, “The margins are the hope of transformation. But you cannot build bridges until you infiltrate the society.” EDAN holds this infiltration of marginalized disabled persons at its very core. The members showed their belief in the hope of transformation as they spontaneously sang together that Saturday night, “Great is thy faithfulness. Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand hath provided. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.” Their hope echoed throughout the Assembly, as all WCC participants prayed together the Assembly theme: “God in your Grace, transform the world!”

## GOD ALWAYS COMES TO SURPRISE US!

Sister Shane Phelan

### Hospitality that Surprised Us

On Sunday, February 19, I attended the Syrian Orthodox Church's celebration of the Liturgy of St. James. The celebrant was H.E. Archbishop Mor Severius Sawirlos Malke Mourad, Patriarch of Jerusalem. The liturgy was chanted in Aramaic. After the five bishops and three priests present received the sacrament, the rest of us – all of us, of all churches – received as well. The Syrian Orthodox Church insists that women cover their heads when receiving, so we each used a shawl brought by one of the students. After the service, which lasted two and a half hours, H.E. Metropolitan Mor Ostatehos Matta Rohom, bishop of Syria and graduate of General Theological Seminary, took us to the altar and showed us the process for breaking the bread. We all ate from a huge loaf, then sweets were passed around.

Why was this the center of my time at the Assembly? First, it was the most moving experience of the week. The Eucharist is the center of my spiritual life. I value tradition, even when I challenge it. So for me, sharing the earliest known liturgy of the church with the bishop of the first church, in the language Jesus spoke, was nothing short of holy. But this event was central for reasons beyond my own devotion. I think it speaks to the gap between what can happen “on the ground,” between people face to face, and what happens in ecclesiology. It is this gap that I want to reflect on in this paper.

From the beginning of the Assembly, the challenges and the opportunities of being together were obvious. At our first evening prayer I noticed the coexistence of the Orthodox delegates in their dark robes and young people wearing tight or skimpy clothing. I have been in Greece and saw women turned away from church for having their arms or legs uncovered, and I felt a bit of sympathy for these men. Here they were, at prayer, and people were running around half naked! I also knew that many people were more uncomfortable seeing the dark robes than they were with shorts and T-shirts; encounter and challenge work both ways.

### Complex Challenges within WCC

The challenges of course go deeper than clothing, although clothing is a sign of larger cultural differences. The *Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches* (hereafter *Final Report*) notes that “the very fact that we are able to pray together – both as individuals and as representatives of our churches – is a sign of the progress that has been made. Yet our common prayer is also a sign of those things that are still to be achieved” (83). Common prayer “can be understood as a time for confession and reconciliation, on the way to a full unity” (85); yet, for some churches, “prayer with Christians outside one’s own tradition is not only uncomfortable, but considered to be impossible” (84). They note specifically Orthodox canons “which may be interpreted as forbidding such prayer” (84).

If prayer is difficult, shared worship is impossible. “From an Orthodox perspective, the Eucharist can only be celebrated by the church and shared by those in sacramental communion” (91). The report allows for confessional celebrations of the Eucharist at assemblies, but specifies that “participants should be advised of the practice of the host church regarding who may receive communion, and should respect that advice” (91). The *Final Report* distinguishes those churches “which *identify* themselves with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” from “those which see themselves as *parts* of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” (72 italics in original). The document suggests that part of the meaning and purpose of the WCC for member churches lies in challenging those churches to articulate their beliefs in the presence of others, to reflect on their self-understandings through the mirror of other Christians.

When I attended the Syrian Orthodox service, it was clear that tradition was important to them in a way that is hard for a westerner to understand. The liturgy, the language, proclaimed, “This is the original! This is the authentic – because original – church!” As an Anglican, and a monastic, I’m big on tradition. But I realized that their “tradition” is something so vivid, so weighty that I have never experienced it. And I wonder about the cost of that weightiness. How can a church that sees itself as the keeper of the original, true faith be ecumenical in a non-imperial way? How can they see other churches, if not as copies or fragments or threats to the true faith? And how can they relate to such bodies in good faith?

The weight of tradition is compounded by what the *Programme Book* describes as “the sharpening of identities” among churches (138). As a “response to a rapidly changing world, with its uncertainty about the future, loss of traditional social values and increasing secularization,” this sharpening is often “anti-ecumenical” in its effects. This is a problem just as much for “newer” churches as for those who see themselves as “original.”

There is a striking difference in tone between the *Final Report* and another Faith and Order document, *Called to be the One Church* (COC), found in the same *Programme Book*. This “invitation” stresses the desire of churches for unity in “common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life” based in baptism and celebrated in Eucharist; mutual recognition of ministry; and a common mission (COC 107, quoting Canberra unity statement). Here it is stressed that “each church in the church catholic and not simply a part of it. Each church is the church catholic, but not the whole of it” (108). Churches are called to stretch to see others as church. Rather than inviting others to join us on our terms, we are asked to reach out toward others as they are.

What makes these two documents so different? It may be, in some ways, a matter of occasion. Just as the apostle Paul stressed some messages to certain churches and other messages to other churches, as each had need, perhaps these reflect the twin imperatives to respect churches where they are in order to enter into dialogue, and to challenge churches to reach past themselves to make dialogue meaningful. I take the *Final Report* to be a carefully worded attempt to bring back into the WCC community churches that are not sure they need to be there. *Called to be the One Church*, on the other hand, seems to be a statement by a group confident enough of its unity and commitment to challenge one another.

For me one of the saddest lines in the *Final Report* is the statement that in exploring a range of ecclesiological issues “there is need to clarify the theological meaning of terms (e.g. ecclesial, ecclesiastical, church, churches, *koinonia*, et al.) in order to avoid unnecessary confusion and misunderstanding” (73). Having spent years in philosophical debate, I am convinced that clarification of terms is often an obfuscation of intention. What exactly will clarification of terms do for us that humility and generosity will not? I do not mean by this to eliminate theology and ecclesiology entirely. I mean that in such a case, where one church is clearly seeing itself as “the one church” and others as missing members, clarification is not what is needed. Clarification seems to be called for in order to maintain divisions. I think what we need is a little less clarification and a little more mixing.

### **Challenges within a Communion**

Lest I seem to be picking on the Orthodox, let me turn to another case where “clarification” has been requested, but is not likely to be helpful: relations between the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA), the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC), and the rest of the Anglican Communion. Relations are currently at a low point, due to the ECUSA’s consecration of an “out” gay man as a bishop and the ACC’s diocesan decision to sanction same-sex marriage. Theologically, we are sharply divided. Documents are flying; the Windsor Report, the ECUSA response, recommendations abound. Theologians are working busily on clarifying terms. So far, I have not heard reports that any of

these documents, as careful and even inspired as they might be have changed the hearts and minds of major actors. The Archbishop of Canterbury addressed the Anglican Communion on February 17.

An eminent theologian, he did not stress clarity. He simply said that the Anglican Communion cannot afford to be the church either of the “North Atlantic liberal elite” or of “post-missionary conservatives”; we can’t afford to drift toward fundamentalism or toward “a well-meaning version of Western society.” “We need each other desperately for spiritual maturity” – we need to be willing to suffer together, to struggle, to love one another without demanding that we get all the recognition or agreement we would like.

Why is it so difficult to be together? According to Williams, the issue is not simply theology. Rather, the “complicated relations of power” lead to the perception that Western elites set the agenda for the Communion. What he calls “the background noise of empire” makes it very hard for us to hear one another as equal members of a larger church. Afterward I had a conversation with Bethuel Kiplagat a retired ambassador from Kenya. He thinks this is exactly what is happening, and suggested that we should end all transfers of money within the Communion so that we can meet as spiritual partners and get past empire. This was an insight for me, as I had seen the rejection of Episcopal Church funds by Nigerians as excessive, self-righteous, etc. In the context of the “background noise” and the need for post-colonial churches to establish themselves, however, I see his point.

We also face the challenges created by real distance from one another. In a healthy church, Williams stated, we should be able to see in one another similar (not identical) patterns of “life and faith” in obedience to Christ. Currently, the Southern churches in the Communion can’t see that obedience in the North, and the metropolitan North sees “narrow reliance on Scripture” that is historically un-Anglican. His answer? We need to “keep listening to each other intimately” in order to discern those patterns of life and faith. Grassroots relationships, projects that bring us together to one side of the most painful topics, enable us to see one another as full people rather than problems. Williams made a point of all the things going on in the Anglican Communion that are not about schism; theological education of the laity, work on the Millennium Development Goals, the environment, globalization.

### **Ecumenism and Interfaith Dialogue**

A suggestion made by the Duleep Kamil de Chickera, Bishop of the Church of Ceylon, led us back to the value of interfaith dialogue. He suggested that in the way forward, the Communion might draw on those churches that have grown up either in situations of conflict or those that have formed in pluralistic, interfaith, interlanguage situations. Interfaith dialogue may not be the “wider ecumenism” we seek – it may be a hidden resource already existing that would strengthen Christian ecumenism!

This point is emphasized by Konrad Raiser in his book, *To Be the Church*. Outlining the challenges and opportunities of the current age, Raiser notes that the modern Western Christian tradition has been too centered on humans at the expense of other life forms, too individualistic, and too imperialistic in its understanding of mission and evangelism. Resources to address these problems lie both in the Orthodox tradition and in other religious traditions (Raiser 2004, 18-23). As we accept “the fading dream of Christian hegemony” and come to embrace “cultural and religious plurality” (21), we may find our Christian faith strengthened rather than shaken. In the face of others, we see ourselves – both in our weaknesses and in our strengths, as distinct and whole people.

The Archbishop’s concern for mutuality in relationship was manifest again in his address to the plenary assembly that day. As he noted, who we are becomes clear only in relation to others; it is relation that “puts us on the map” of the world. Our identity emerges both among others “like” us and in contrasts to those “other” to us. For Williams, being Christian is a matter of “seeing as Jesus saw the world and God.” This means seeing beyond our loyalties to any one idea or system. It



means “solidarity with others oppressed,” no matter what their faith or doctrines. It’s easy for this to remain abstract in majority-Christian cultures, where the religious other is either somewhere else or relatively disempowered or marginalized. In cultures where Christians are in a minority, where Christianity is seen as a threat or a “relic of empire,” then working with “others” is both courageous and indispensable. This is not a matter of tolerant co-existence, but amounts to loving in the face of fear.

### A Publication With a Difference

Several *mutirão* sessions stressed the need to practice the discipline of finding similarity in disparity or reaching across disparities to find something to share. In fact, early on I heard challenges to the idea of unity. The ecumenical ideal for many is rooted in empire, in the dream of “one world” that contradicts the biblical example of local churches. At the workshop on “Recentering the Ecumenical Movement in Spirituality,” we discussed moving from unity to “being together in disparity,” a situation beyond right or wrong in which simply being together is sacred. According to one of the leaders of the session, “spiritual ecumenism” is a “holistic methodology” that draws on resources from all traditions to help us see what we miss from “inside” our own traditions alone. This point was repeated by Anantanand Rambachan at the “Wider Ecumenism” *mutirão*, when he said, “We need to see ourselves through the eyes of others, to improve our own traditions.”

Rambachan is part of the WCC group “Thinking Together,” a group focusing on interreligious relations. Their book, *Faces of the Other*,<sup>22</sup> is an intriguing contrast to many WCC publications. Pieces in this book are short and varied in style, ranging from stories to history to more traditional scholarly discourse. The title, *Faces of the Other*, is taken quite seriously in this volume. The cover shows faces. Between each chapter we see photos of eyes. Other pictures dot the pages. People are preeminent here. Seeing this reminded me of Emmanuel Levinas’s argument that the Hebrew Bible is a book of “faces, not figures” (Levinas 1990). He means by this that the characters and stories in the Hebrew Bible are not there to “illustrate a point” or to “prefigure” Christian themes. They are to be encountered as people, as complex, contradictory, complete beings beyond any one attribute or action. Levinas contrasts this approach with the Christian history of allegorizing and metaphorizing Scripture. Such usages always do violence to the Bible, as seeing others as lessons or types does violence to the actual persons that they are.

At his panel on “wider ecumenism,” Wesley Ariarajah noted that differences among Christians are just as real and just as painful as differences between Christians and adherents to other religions. Indeed, I found myself thinking that the line between ecumenism and interfaith is a slippery one. In spite of avowals of creedal unity (e.g. the rules for membership, I.3.a, *Programme Book* 45), it seems to me that cultural and historical differences between churches are as large and momentous as those between religions. Do I really share the same faith as that of the Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria? He thinks not, and I’m not sure he’s wrong. I’m sure, though, that commissions and inquires are unlikely to show us what we share. Meeting as people, close listening and encounter, may show us a shared faith and shared discipleship – then again, they may not.

It is almost inevitable that we will engage in this kind of violence as long as we think among “ourselves” (whatever group that is) without encountering or being encountered by “others.” Inevitably we will see our experience as normative, our ideas as logical and sensible, our tastes and values as best. This is just as likely to be the case if we meet others always on our home turf, or even if we do mission work from a position of benevolent superiority. If we think that coming together is about bringing enlightenment to the heathen (or the fallen, or schismatic), then we will not allow ourselves to be truly challenged and converted. But if we don’t come together at all, we don’t stand a chance.

If we come together, then it almost doesn’t matter what our task or topic is. Kathy Galloway of the Iona Community stated that “only a demanding common task builds community”. Ariarajah stressed

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<sup>22</sup> Hans Ucko, ed. *Faces of the Other* (A contribution by the group Thinking Together on Inter-religious Relations and Dialogue), WCC Publications 2005.

the need for “life together rather than doctrinal unity”. Over and over, at session after session, this message came through. At that *mutirão* on Inter-religious Education, participants spoke of working of projects including literacy in the Philippines, education of base community leaders in Venezuela and Colombia, and housing initiatives in the Caribbean. Each emphasized the need to deal with life issues that affect our communities, regardless of faith. An issue-based approach lets us see what we share, while often an approach focused on our ideas gets stalled.

### **Conclusion: God at Work**

I was disappointed to see that at these *mutirão* sessions there were virtually no Orthodox participants. Unless the topic was Orthodoxy or interfaith, the audience was almost exclusively Protestant. I suspect that this is not due to lack of interest or desire, but is a reflection of economic inequality. The delegates do indeed get the experience of meeting with one another, both in business and in the ecumenical conversations, but I want the experience of meeting to be available to more people. On the other hand, most Christians in the two-thirds world are living in a more interfaith world than Europeans and North Americans do. I have long been aware of Eucharistic boundaries. I regularly go on retreat in Catholic retreat houses, and while Jesuits tend to ignore the rules they are printed in worship materials. I was aware of Orthodox restrictions, but I had not attended an Orthodox Eucharist, so the point had been moot. I went to the Sunday Eucharist expecting not to partake. So what happened? As the service progressed, I became aware that some sort of unspoken deliberation was going on between the celebrant and the other bishops in attendance. It was clearly about us. We were very surprised to be invited to receive, and I think they were just as surprised to invite us.

God always comes to surprise us. One thoughtful pastor I know who has devoted his life to interfaith education says, “if you aren’t surprised, it isn’t from God.” I think the Holy Spirit swept into that chapel and shook us all a bit out of our usual paths. That doesn’t mean that the bishops will all go home and start offering communion to anyone who comes to visit. It doesn’t mean that they will change their documents or doctrines. But maybe, just maybe, the next time they work with someone from another tradition, they will have the memory of how much it meant to me to be included. Maybe they will know that they can share and still maintain their identities. And maybe, someday, we will smile at one another and share a common task that is bigger than any of us. Maybe together we will reach out to someone else who desperately needs us both. Maybe we will have a new Nicene Council, devoted not to theological definition and enforced adherence but to transforming the world. God, in your grace, make it so!

**The worship experiences were fantastic. I rarely sat next to anyone from Drew because I am somewhat shy by nature, and I needed to force myself to interact with strangers. But nobody seemed strange. The body of participants was so diverse that anyone could blend in. No color stood out, no language seemed odd, no clothing looked strange – it seemed wonderfully colorful and rich. Perhaps there was more singing than I would chose (I am no musician), but the beat was usually lively and exuberant. What I really responded to was the sound of different languages, because I love language. Sometimes, when we were asked to pray the Lord’s Prayer in our own languages, I prayed silently just so I could enjoy the wonderful sound of Pentecost all around me. I think what particularly drew me into the liturgies of the worship services was the fact that they were so intentional. I knew that they were not a product of different denominations talking amongst themselves; rather, that they were an effort to reach out and communicate to others – to pray in community – and so they were highly intentional.**

(Anne Rosselot, Assembly participant from the DST)

## THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT AND COMMON PRAYER

Benjamin Davis

### Introduction to WCC's Vision

At the Assembly, I saw the joy and hope of the ecumenical movement. I marveled at the incredible diversity of creeds, ethnicities, nationalities, and ages. I also experienced the tensions between different doctrines, different cultures, and between competing visions of the future of the ecumenical movement, tensions that were most clear during our times of common prayer. The ecumenical movement is far greater than any particular organization, even one as large as the World Council of Churches. The ecumenical movement is people reaching out beyond their own theological, geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic particularities for collaboration and conversation, in search of the universal identity in Jesus Christ which unites us all. It is, as Chris Boesel referred to in his spring matriculation address, “witnessing to our own particularity” and in doing so, hopefully finding common ground with other particularities that point us to the universal which binds us together.

Official WCC materials describe the World Council of Churches in several different ways. First, it is the largest Christian ecumenical movement in the world, although it only includes mainline Protestant and Orthodox churches. As Marlin Van Eldren and Martin Conway write, it is an “interdenominational movement” that “confesses Jesus Christ as Lord according to scriptures”.<sup>23</sup> It is a social organization that “responds with compassionate and effective action when people are suffering”.<sup>24</sup> It is a forum to explore doctrinal issues in a setting where voices from across cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic strata can be heard.<sup>25</sup>

The World Council of Churches also works to demonstrate visible unity as a witness to the world. This does not mean solely structural unity, although the World Council of Churches has helped facilitate denominational mergers. It does not solely mean doctrinal unity, although the World Council of Church’s report “Baptism and the Eucharist” has been instrumental for forming a common understanding among churches on these two Sacraments. It means “simply being together”<sup>26</sup>, working on common issues, praying together, and seeking after a “common calling”<sup>27</sup> from God.

While attending *mutirão*, I heard different generations emphasize different parts of the World Council of Churches’ vision when talking about the future of the ecumenical movement. Younger people talked about finding ways to converse and share common ministries together, rather than discussing doctrinal or structural issues. I heard them talk about the need for people to “open hearts to the common reality of the experience we’re struggling with”<sup>28</sup>. Rather than focusing on “what is right or wrong”, they thought that the ecumenical movement should focus upon the question “what do we see together?”, find “common journey points together”, and realize that we “need each other to teach us what each other sees”. Their focus was on entering into a “common narrative” and a “common calling”.<sup>29</sup> In “Reconfigurations of the Ecumenical Movement: New Ways of Doing Ecumenical Work”, young adult ecumenists from Europe spoke about their vision for ecumenism in their generation. They spoke about finding room for “practical encounters rather than theoretical

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<sup>23</sup> VanEldren, Marlin and Martin Conway. *Introducing the World Council of Churches*. WCC Publications. 2001. 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 14

<sup>28</sup> Re-centering the Ecumenical Movement in Spirituality (15-Feb 2005)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

encounters”<sup>30</sup> where people did not worry about structure, but simply gathered for conversation and common work. Rather than focusing on the institutional hierarchies, they wanted to emphasize “grassroots” movements, where the laity is the focus of the ecumenical movement. In the conversation after their presentation, I noticed that the reaction to their vision was split along generational lines. The older ecumenists, many of whom were long-time members of the World Council of Churches, asked questions like “When will you organize?”, “Who will have authority?”, “What will your organization look like?”, “What common stances will you have?”, or “What are your specific goals for when you get together?”. They commented that the presenters’ vision seemed overly vague, without clearly defined objectives and was therefore doomed to failure. The younger adults responded that their end goal was simply to meet, talk, and perhaps share in a common task, a point which the older members never completely understood.

### **Dynamic Tension**

As a young adult, I sympathized with the presenters as they shared their vision and I thought that the older skeptics’ concerns were premature. When I think about my previous experiences with ecumenism, I find that being together and working for a common cause formed the most powerful bonds. Only once people feel like they are walking the same journey, do questions of doctrine and structure become more central. For instance, I volunteered with an ecumenical Christian organization called *Vida Nueva*, which planned religious weekends for youth. Theologically, it was an extremely diverse group, involving fundamentalist Baptists, Quakers, non-denominational Christians, and United Methodists.

It was this dynamic tension which made this ministry so powerful. Each weekend transformed lives and formed lifelong friendships among the participants. The organization functioned well with only a very basic statement of faith and a guidebook on how to run a weekend. While members had significant disagreements on matters of doctrine, it did not split our fellowship. I remember watching two volunteers have a passionate argument about evolution, which ended with both of them hugging and saying “I love you”. I heard people preach mainline Protestant theology and others preach that “Adam bit that apple and we all fell” during the same weekend. I saw active Democrats and Republicans talking together, drinking out of mugs with their respective party’s logos on them. When we saw the work that God was doing in our midst, we realized that our ideological, structural, and theological differences were secondary. Because we all had the “common journey point” of our experience of God through that ministry, we came to more deeply acknowledge one another’s Christianity and form close relationships despite the sharp polarization in the larger culture.

In particular, we experienced this unity in diversity through our times of prayer and worship together. Worship was the center of our weekends. Singing songs from all of our traditions brought down barriers and opened up hearts. Communion, which was even served by a Quaker minister once, affirmed our unity. As we prayed individually for one another during the weekend, we formed deeper spiritual friendships. Rituals where people reflected on their lives and placed slips of paper upon a cross opened us to understand our mutual brokenness.

### **Beyond Common Prayers**

When looking at the future of the ecumenical movement, it is important that disparate churches find common ground in areas besides doctrine and structure, a point which the younger generation seemed to emphasize during the assembly. One place where all groups in the ecumenical movement could find “common journey points” is through worship where Christians of all ethnicities, cultures, ages, genders, and creeds gather in the same sacred space for the same purpose. It is a place for common theological and spiritual formation. It provides an arena where Christians can celebrate the differences and find mutual understanding and respect. However, common prayer only creates

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<sup>30</sup> Reconfiguration of the Ecumenical Movement – New Ways of Doing Ecumenical Work! (15-Feb 2005)

common ground if the community has something at stake. People need to actively participate rather than simply watch during communal prayer. If the congregation is disconnected from what happens, then communal prayer and worship will not form the common journey points that will form the basis of the future ecumenical movement. Common prayer typified the experience of the ecumenical movement in the Assembly.

The World Council of Churches' official material puts worship, referred to as common prayer, at the center of the ecumenical movement. Prayer is "at the heart of Christians...[it] is central to the life of each assembly of the World Council of Churches, where all are invited and welcome."<sup>31</sup> Not only is it "at the center" of the Assembly, but it is perhaps the World Council of Churches' "primary export", with people bringing music, such as Taizé chanting, from the Assembly to their churches across the world.<sup>32</sup> It also serves as a checkpoint where the tensions and potential pitfalls of the ecumenical movement are demonstrated as well. According to *Programme Book*, Prayer lies at the centre of our identity as Christians, both in our separate communions and in the conciliar ecumenical movement. The very fact that we are able to pray together- is a sign of the progress that has been made. Yet our common prayer is also a sign of those things that are still to be achieved.<sup>33</sup>

Even the term "common prayer" tells us a lot about the current state of the ecumenical movement. The terms "ecumenical prayer" or "worship" were not used, primarily at the insistence of the Orthodox Churches, which understand worship to mean a gathering of one church for the celebration of the Eucharist<sup>34</sup>. The term "Interconfessional common prayer" was used instead.<sup>35</sup> The official World Council of Churches materials spoke to this tension.

The overall tone of the document [*The Report of the Special Commission On Orthodox Participation*] follows the line of 'discipline' rather than of spiritual freedom and joy...the guidelines try to raise awareness about the ways in which we might unintentionally offend each other and strive to make planners of common prayer more aware of potential areas of concern.<sup>36</sup>

This attitude of careful respect led to an excellent willingness to include all traditions in prayer times. We heard from most major Christian traditions that belonged to the WCC, such as Anglicans, Lutherans, and Orthodox Churches, and some that did not, including charismatic Pentecostals. We heard liturgy in many different languages, with various styles of music, from traditional instrumentation, to *karaoke* style singing, to chanting with cymbals. On the whole, (except for the glaring exception of the all-male instrumental band that accompanied many of the worship services), different traditions, ethnicities, genders, abilities, and ages were well represented throughout all common prayer times.

However, common prayer at the Assembly clearly reflected the tension rather than the unity of the ecumenical movement. Common prayer was competently led, with prepared readers, a large choir, top notch musicians, and well arranged music. However, rather than speaking "to the soul of each of us"<sup>37</sup>, it was either a tense, awkwardly constructed compromise or a performance of particularity, where one group would perform a service out of their tradition and left the congregation as spectators. The gathered community had little stake in what happened. Personally, I found worship to be more about performance than about communal prayer. The worship services appeared to be designed to take prayer out of the hands of the community and into the hand of the worship leaders, as if by removing the congregation, the uneasy truce between different views of common prayer could be kept. For instance, many of the songs in common prayer were difficult for non-Spanish or Portuguese speakers to sing, were not taught beforehand, and often had difficult rhythms, thus excluding a large portion of the congregation from effectively participating in singing.

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<sup>31</sup> *En Tu Graca*. Geneva: WCC Publications. 2006. 73-74.

<sup>32</sup> WCC Assembly Notes. February 15 2006.

<sup>33</sup> *Programme Book*. WCC Publications. 2006. 83-84.

<sup>34</sup> *From Harare to Porto Alegre, 1998-2006*. WCC Publications 2005, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Programme Book*. WCC Publications 2005, p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> *From Harare to Porto Alegre, 1998-2006*, WCC Publications 2005, p.36.

<sup>37</sup> *En Tua Graca* 74

Most of the liturgy was spoken up front, rather than by the congregation, meaning that the congregation spent more time listening than actively engaging with the worship service. There were times when the congregation had absolutely no stake in what happened. For instance, the Opening Common Prayer featured a fifteen to twenty minute, sixteen page litany, in which the congregation listened to liturgists for several minutes and then sang a five second musical phrase. In another instance, during the evening prayer on February 18th, the Anglicans led a worship service in which the choir sang the liturgy, a liturgist read the scripture, and the choir led hymns that were largely impossible to sight read. I felt simultaneously interested in how that particular tradition prayed and frustrated that I was denied the opportunity to participate in it. I wrote immediately after this time of common prayer that it felt “almost radically non participatory...the choir sings the liturgy...this is a performance of particularities not a participation in one that could make us greater appreciate the universal....I was a spectator here, my total participation was limited to *kyrie eleison* and one hymn”.

Other times, common prayer was simply not stimulating. For instance, on the first night, in oppressive heat and humidity (at least to me and other members of the class), we sat through a long service with few opportunities for the congregation to participate besides from a series of sung responses. That, combined with a long sermon that was more like an academic lecture and a fifteen minute litany, in which the congregation participated very little, left people bored and eager to rush onto the buses after the service was finished, rather than left with the conviction that prayer is central to ecumenism.

In the end, people did not buy into common prayer as an important foundation for ecumenism. I noticed that a significant portion of the congregation was absent during both morning and evening prayer, especially as the week progressed. There were even times when I personally questioned why I should go to morning or evening prayer when I would not have an opportunity to participate. By mid-week, congregational singing, at least where I was sitting, was sparse and unenthusiastic, with many people simply sitting, watching, and even talking amongst themselves as the service happened at the front.

### **Powerful Ecumenical Moment**

These experiences during common prayer made it difficult for true ecumenical moments to happen. However, other worship settings did provide for powerful ecumenical moments, such as the one that occurred during the Syrian Orthodox worship service on Sunday morning (described in the previous article). The Syrian Orthodox leaders, who usually do not allow members of other Christian denominations to stay inside the building during the Eucharist, allowed everyone who came to the service to partake in the Sacrament. This act of ecumenism became the highlight of the Assembly for several of our group members. I do not believe this would have happened had they been carefully crafting a prayer time that was not offensive, rather, in their own bold celebration of their tradition, they were able to find room for other people to participate in their particularity and in doing so, created a common journey point for the people who came.

With the rich resources that the World Council of Churches has at its disposal, developing effective times of common prayer should not be difficult. For instance, common prayer by committee hardly ever works. Perhaps a better course in the future would be for worship to be developed by one or two people well-versed in ecumenism under the guidance of a committee that would work with them to make sure that all traditions were respected. This would allow for worship to be more engaging and for people to hopefully celebrate their own traditions without feeling the need to either apologize for them or to exclude others from participating.

I think it would be particularly important to ensure that the gathered community is always engaged in the service. One could select songs are easy to sing and well-taught beforehand and that there is a full-time song leader to lead the congregation. One could turn long litanies read by one person into

responsive litanies read by the congregation or different groups within the congregation. One could break the congregation into small groups to pray for one another. Experiences like these would bind people together in a mutual encounter with the same spirit and provide ground for relationships and conversation.

Common prayer is a central part of the ecumenical tradition. It is one place where we can transcend doctrine, structure, and culture, and use our differences to come to a richer universal understanding of our common walk with Jesus Christ. While we may never be able to completely overcome all our particularities, we can at least join in a common spiritual experience which binds us in a way that will lead us, if not to agreement, to greater appreciation and respect for our differences, and a deeper commitment to work together for the good of the world.

**We were born of different wombs  
you and I  
in different times  
and places and into different races  
black, white, yellow, brown,  
different hair textures  
different visions of the world  
indigenous, conquerors  
powerless, powerful  
endowed, improvid  
yet.....  
when we come  
together in prayer  
and praise and worship  
our differences  
our divisiveness  
transforms us into one.**

(Deborah Stapleton, Assembly participant from the DST)

## ISSUES RELATED TO VIOLENCE

DeLyn Celec

### Introduction

At the World Council of Churches violence is discussed at interpersonal, structural, community, and societal levels. In this paper, I will reflect on ways the church endorses violence, and the ways in which the presenters of the *Mutirao* workshops are working to address them. Furthermore, I include my thoughts regarding my personal responsibility in light of the knowledge gained at, and because of, the *Oikoumene* gathering. I commit to the promotion of peace and nonviolence in my own life and ministry, and will share the ways in which I intend to do so. Finally, several art pieces have been inspired by this trip, and I share a sample of those, as well.

I attended workshops and presentations on violence towards women in “Violence in David’s Household and Ours”, violence as a worldwide health concern in “Looking at Violence from a Health Perspective”, family violence in “Overcoming Violence in Families: Keys to a Constructive Way Forward”, and violence of persons who are able-bodied toward persons with disabilities in “Violence Against Persons with Disabilities”. Certainly, the plenary sessions provided much information about the ways in which violence shapes our world. In this paper, I focus only on the *Mutirao* workshops.

I attended other events that frame the information I gained about violence. The Drew sessions provided me with vocabulary, history, and perspective that add focus and dimension to my learning experience. Also, I had the privilege of participating in the Metropolitan Community Church’s open and affirming discussions and worship. This is particularly meaningful for me because I can view *my own* struggle for liberation in *my own* community in the context of the greater struggle for liberation for *all* people in *all* the world.

The over-arching lesson with which I left the *Oikoumene* gathering is a new vocabulary for a long-standing conviction: objectifying humans is an act of violence. Reconciling the church, as a whole, requires personal commitments of the churches’ members to love, listen, and learn. Certainly, many other actions are needed to overcome violence completely. I commit myself to love all people, listen to others fully, and learn all I can about violence and how to stop it. These simplistic-sounding commitments are not powerful enough to end all violence in the whole world. However, I can take a small step toward non-violent reconciliation by modeling this in my own life for anyone who might be watching, including those of whom I am to be a spiritual leader.

A brief liturgical dialogue was inspired by the plenary in which we learned about the genocide crisis in Northern Uganda. It illustrates the ignorance with which many of the church’s members regard the “outside world,” and the self-righteousness that is often associated with doing so. It also illustrates the educating of our children to remain ignorant. It could be presented as reader’s theater, and used as an introduction to injustice in the world and the church’s responsibility to it.

“Eden?”

*Daughter (4-6 years old): Dad, why do we go to church all the time?*

*Dad: To serve God, honey. We go to God’s house to worship God.*

*Daughter: What happens outside the church while we’re inside?*

*Dad (winking): Good Christians don’t know, honey.”*

### Violence in David’s Household and Ours

Violence is upheld by the church by maintaining silence about it. Specifically, violence against women is upheld by failing to talk about the stories within our own canon about violence. The



Ujamaa Center School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa in partnership with the Foundation for Human Rights, Norwegian Church Aid, publishes bible studies on problematic biblical passages. The Center has initiated Tamar Campaign: “The aim of this campaign is to empower churches to break the chains of silence regarding physical, spiritual, mental and verbal abuse of women” (*Tamar Campaign* pamphlet distributed at the workshop). The presenters argue that the Bible, as a common canon, presents a “safe space” in which Christians can share intimate and troublesome dialogue. They encourage pastors and Christian educators to utilize violent stories within the Bible in order to educate people about violence, both then and now. The Bible study to which we were introduced in the workshop was about the Tamar story in 2 Samuel 13, in which Tamar is raped by her half-brother Ammon because she was not protected from sexual assault by her familial structure. The study provides a responsible way to discuss this story, which can lay groundwork for further discussion on gender-based violence.

The Tamar study is used because of Tamar’s courage. She speaks against the injustice of her abuser. One presenter, Anneal Kristy, calls Tamar “the most articulate woman in the Hebrew Bible.” Survivors of sexual abuse can look at this story and take courage also. Furthermore, survivors of incest can relate to her, since Tamar was violated in her own home. Her home should be a place in which she is safe from sexual abuse, yet she is not safe. Her abuser is protected by their family, and she is not protected at all. It is a perspective from which I had never before viewed the Tamar story. It does not excuse the actions of Tamar’s rapist, but offers a hopeful, courageous example for survivors of incest.

I saw proof that the Tamar study opens doors to dialogue. A few people in the group, which had only been together for several minutes, spoke about their own stories of abuse. During the workshop, we split into groups of four and participated in an abbreviated version of the study, and heard even more painful stories among our quartets.

As a leader within the church, I am responsible for raising awareness about violence toward women in our communities. This study is one that I would use, with the help and support of other leaders. The study appears to be tremendously useful and responsibly constructed. Even if the opportunity to introduce this study is not present, I commit to talk about the difficult topic of gender-based violence, sexual and otherwise.

### **Looking at Violence from a Health Perspective**

The church upholds violence by viewing violence as merely an ontological problem. When most pastors and ministers discuss violence, it is something that exists, somewhere out in the world, for reasons defined by terms such as “sin” and “evil.” As a spiritual issue, I would agree with this assessment. However, leaders ignore a huge portion of the problem when they discuss only the ontological problem, and the political and criminal justice ramifications. In reality, violence is a worldwide health problem that plagues people across cultures and socioeconomic statuses, and should be addressed as such. The statistics that were shared at the workshop overwhelmed me. Although it is inexcusable, I can understand the complacency of the churches in developed nations: the complexity of the problem is staggering. When violence is viewed as a health crisis that it is, increased support can be dedicated to overcoming it. The ontological issue of violence can only be eradicated by abolishing the world of spiritual dis-ease. In contrast, the health perspective provides a concrete problem for which solutions can be implemented by medical professionals, health caregivers, and other living human beings. Three presenters Hansuli Gerber (Switzerland), Edwardo Compania (Columbia) and Roy Joseph (Singapore) representing WCC and World Health Organization (WHO) shared a great deal of statistics. All three cite education and unity as the primary tools to overcome violence. Since the problem is so complex, they recommended comprehensive and holistic alliances that eventually teach the world that violence is a major public health issue that hurts everyone. For instance, 1.6 million people die each year due to violence. Approximately half of those deaths are suicides, nearly a third are homicides in interpersonal interaction of which the overwhelming majority of victims are women and perpetrators are men. Fewer than twenty percent are the cause of armed conflict, including acts of terrorism, and yet the

United States' government highlights terrorism as something of which we should be most fearful. These statistics do not begin to address morbid injuries caused by violence, which is difficult to determine since many of these go unreported, or misreported as "accidents."

We learned about the cycle that perpetuates generationally, as children are raised by parents who perpetrate or endure violence in violent communities. Many of the parents are ill or injured because of violent conditions. The children grow into adults who are not equipped to get healthy and stay healthy. The presenters speak about violence on four levels: individual, relational, communal, and societal. They highlighted the ways in which each level of violence helps to uphold the others. Most disturbing is that this decade, dedicated to promoting peace and nonviolence, has been, so far, the most violent decade ever.

The presenters specifically hold the church responsible for upholding structural violence. First, the church does not invest money in long-term plans to eradicate violence since the investment produces "long-term dividends" (Joseph) and bears a high cost in the beginning. Second, the church consistently uses violent language to name activities in which Christians engage to serve God. For example, our college campuses have Christian groups called "Campus Crusade for Christ," which, by definition, is a warring image. We are "Christian Soldiers" (United Methodist Hymnal 575), serving a God who "...hast smitten all [our] enemies..." (Psalm 3:7, KJV).

I am surprised to learn that suicide is the cause of approximately 800,000 of the deaths due to violence each year. My surprise is not at the number of suicides, but rather, that suicide is considered "violent death." The definition of violence, according to the WHO is "intentional use of physical power, threatened or actual, related to injury or death" (Gerber). I am embarrassed that I had not viewed suicide as violent act. Raised in a middle-class home in the United States, I learned that we have choices in our lives. No matter how oppressed we may be by a person or circumstance, we are expected to "bounce back" from it and choose to heal ourselves. Suicide is nothing more than a poor choice, according to my background.

In the positions of leadership in which I find myself, I can educate, and facilitate education of, the people with whom I minister. The difficult part of this commitment is that I must know my limitations. Self-care is an important factor in ministry when I feel overwhelmed by an impossible task. Practically speaking, I must focus on the tiny ways in which I can bring this terrible awareness to those around me, seeking and seizing opportunities to present the reality of violence as a threat to health. I can use my art to raise awareness, and help to sort things out for myself. Here is a poem I was inspired to write by this workshop.

*You need a strong stomach, you know,  
Tasting "foul," feeling "suffer," smelling "death".  
You need a broad, free-thinking mind, and broad, free-moving shoulders:  
The mind furnished with shelves that can be rearranged  
instantaneously to accommodate, store, and re-store;  
The shoulders able to hold the weight of the world,  
yet still shimmy through a space too small to hold you...  
oh, and water-resistant for the tears.  
You need a fast car, or tireless wings – something to get you across  
a universe of "what you thought was true" to  
"beyond your most horrifying imaginings."  
You need some thick skin covering a soft heart:  
the calluses to absorb the wear and tear,  
as the heart breaks and mends and breaks again.  
You need a faith stronger than the one in mere humanity,  
because humanity is going to get easier and easier to hate.  
But if you start hating, you've become the one you are trying to overcome.  
You need a strong stomach, you know.*

## **Overcoming Violence in Families: Keys to a Constructive Way Forward**

Violence is upheld in the church by treating violence merely as an extension of conflict. I would argue that conflict, in and of itself, is an opportunity with which we are gifted because of the diversity of God's creation. We engage in conflict because each person in every community, society, culture, and all sub-groups thereof, thinks in a different way from each other. The complexity of humanity, as inhabitants of the earth, should be celebrated as a reflection of the complexity of our Creator. Violence undermines the progress that can potentially grow out of conflict.

In the first Drew session we learned that *Oikoumene* is the term for "the inhabited earth." The workshop on family violence breathed life into the term. Since the church is to be the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12), we can see family violence in the conflicts of the church, and vice versa. Struggles for power and inappropriate displays of anger are seen in the church in the same way that we see them in familial relationships. When the earth is being inhabited, and not merely used for individual purposes, conflict can drive our need to work in cooperation with one another as people. When this is achieved, the global household can operate functionally, including full participation of all members.

The Lutheran Church of Bavaria (LCB) addresses family violence by educating people. The LCB honors conflict, and teaches people how to manage it. The eight guiding principles to overcome violence are respect, justice, theological reflection, discipleship, solidarity, human rights, participation, and taking action. Coupled with the acknowledgement that every person has the potential to be violent, these principles offer non-judgmental means of holding people accountable for their behavior.

The LCB educates in a multi-tiered framework. On an individual level, it works interpersonally with victims and perpetrators of violence through health care and youth organizations. On a public and social level, it teaches people within institutions and the general population to reflect upon and analyze social norms and values. On a legal level, it demands human rights within penal and judicial systems, providing advocacy and opportunity for learning.

I am particularly interested in the work of Jean Parfet, an educator from Cameroon who specializes in gender awareness and relationship development. She facilitates and mediates dialogue about worldwide core issues. In sex-segregated groups, she encourages open, honest dialogue about gender abuse, HIV & AIDS, and women in poverty. Together, the persons in the dialogue discuss the pre-cursors to physical violence and abuse. Then the women's and men's groups are combined. Parfet is enthusiastic about the outcome of allowing men to hold each other accountable, and for women to hold each other accountable, before they must discuss difficult issues in both-sex company. She points out that humans are not automatically inclined to be together in a nonviolent way: we must practice in order to engage nonviolent relationship. Violence is counter-productive to the process of conflict. I can utilize the principles learned in this workshop in my own ministry by hosting dialogues and encouraging people to practice conflicting in a nonviolent way. I commit to model the principles in my own interactions and relationships. By no means is violence a natural extension of conflict, and I will actively preach, lead study, and pray about the difference between conflict and violence. Furthermore, I commit to speak about actively pursuing peace, rather than calling my church "peaceful" simply because no one is bickering that day.

## **Violence Against Persons with Disabilities**

The church upholds violence by confusing vulnerability with weakness. The church is called to help people who are in need, which it often does. However, the church, as a whole, fails to help persons with disabilities *and* to simultaneously honor the dignity of those persons. At this workshop, the stories that we heard about ways in which persons with disabilities are abused were told by persons with disabilities.

The groups represented by the panel of presenters address violence against persons with disabilities by stating that they support the building of peace culture. They recommend interfaith peace-building. The intention is to collaborate with non-government organizations in promoting the Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. The goal of the group was to place persons with disabilities on panels and in dialogues on overcoming violence at every level of church and society.

Persons with disabilities are in greater danger of violence for many reasons. First, the nature of the person's disability may help to make the person unable to run away, or unable to tell anyone about the abuse. Second, persons with disabilities have often undergone a great deal of medical care that teaches them to be "good victims." Third, a person with disabilities may receive extensive personal care for hygiene, leaving her or him in one-on-one situations, unclothed, with a caregiver who can easily sexually abuse her or him. Finally, persons with disabilities are often unemployed or underemployed, leaving limited resources to hire legal advocacy when needed.

Many untruths about persons with disabilities also uphold violence toward them. First, it is common for people who are able-bodied to think that the person with disabilities is protected by the disability. Regarding sexual violence, the common misconception is that no one would ever find him or her attractive. Regarding non-sexual violence, the common misconception is that others would feel sorry for the person with disabilities and leave him or her alone. Second, people without disabilities may think that abuse is not as harmful to the person with disabilities. Third, people without disabilities may think that the person with disabilities cannot discriminate between "normal" touches and abusive sexual touches. A fourth common misconception is that prevention of the abuse of persons with disabilities is impossible. Finally, people without disabilities often believe that therapy is not helpful to the person with mental disabilities.

I am ashamed about two things in this workshop. First, every facilitator, educator, and advocate was a person with a disability. We did not see a single example of an able-bodied advocate. The second factor about which I am ashamed is that, in content, it stands in contrast with all of the others I attended. The other workshops charted the work that their organizations had done up to the present. They shared elaborate plans of action on structural and interpersonal levels, including many ways that the attendees can help. At this workshop, each presenter essentially explained the need for persons with disabilities to be heard. The plans of action were general and in early phases of implementation. For all of these reasons, I conclude that persons with disabilities are only barely beginning to be heard.

In the example of Jesus, we see a Helper and Healer who also treated human beings with dignity, honoring their personhood. For example, in the story of the paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof in Mark 2:3-12, Jesus did not see the man's physical disability first. Instead, he saw a spiritual being in need of forgiveness, and addressed his spiritual needs before he made the man able to walk.

In following Jesus' example, the church must see and address the spiritual needs of *all* people, including persons with disabilities. The presenters at this workshop spoke matter-of-factly about their own struggles, citing the ways in which all crises in human existence are complex for persons with disabilities. During times of natural disaster or war, those who cannot walk or hear are often forgotten and left behind, unable to evacuate themselves. A mentally challenged woman is three times more likely than a woman who is not mentally challenged to be sexually abused. A physically challenged child is often hidden by his or her parents out of embarrassment. All of these tragic circumstances carry spiritual ramifications, and the church must equip itself to minister accordingly.

With the help of the Metropolitan Community Church, I processed some of this shame. As an able-bodied person, I expect the church to modify its behavior when it discovers that it is being unjust. As a lesbian, however, I have experienced the lack of compassion that renders people unable or unwilling to treat me with dignity and respect. In the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) community, we often tell our stories in matter-of-fact, or even sarcastic and joking,

manners. The telling of the painful stories in ways that do not match their painful nature often denies the emotional turmoil in which we find ourselves. Sometimes, we must “check in,” so to speak, and remember (re-member?) ourselves in order to re-mobilize us from our emotional paralysis. In that spirit, my prayer for renewal of hope became a verse to a hymn, to which the tune would be Nettleton. It was written while journaling about the workshop on Violence Towards Persons with Disabilities.

*Who can share my expectation?  
Who is torn enough to see?  
I am called and I am strengthened:  
In this clarity I'm free.  
As the truth shines in my being,  
Way, itself, becomes my guide,  
Be my Life, bold, fiery Jesus,  
Resurrect the hope that died.*

As a leader in the church, I commit to advocating for persons with disabilities. I will seek opportunities to let the voice of persons with disabilities be heard. I will insist upon using inclusive language in worship services, such as inviting people to stand rather than saying “Stand if you are able.” I will truly listen to the persons with disabilities with whom I minister for clues that they are being mistreated, abused, neglected, or victimized in any way. I will help to clear up untruth about persons with disabilities, such as “no one would be attracted to her because she has Cerebral Palsy, so she is safe from rape.”

### **The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC)**

The MCC is not a member of the WCC because of its controversial embracing of persons of all gender identities and sexual orientations, but it was present as an observer. Participating in the discussions was meaningful to me in the processing of the injustices of which I learned at the Assembly. As an LGBT person, I experience inequality every day in a hetero-normative society. I am strengthened in the company of those whose experiences are similar. In the MCC group I could clearly see a group of people who have journeyed long and hard, made some progress, and have a long road ahead. “The hope is in the margins,” said retired Imam Omar Rashied at our Drew session with him. That was certainly true at these sessions.

I gained vocabulary and clarity in these sessions. For example, I have struggled extensively, as many seminarians do, with “What am I doing in this church?” One woman in attendance called herself a critical insider, which spoke to me in a way that the term never had previously. I am also a critical insider in this church. As a critical insider, I can speak and act in peace and nonviolence as a follower of Jesus’ example, rather than a follower of the church structure that upholds violence.

The MCC worship service, in which I had the privilege of participating on the music leadership team, was a deeply worshipful experience. I am always emotionally touched when I see LGBT persons able to “relax and be themselves” in a worship setting. This was much more. I gained a new perspective as I saw a congregation full of LGBT persons and straight allies of many different cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, and races. It reminds me that, although the struggle for equality is far from over in the United States, LGBT persons in some other countries suffer a type of violence of which I will ever know. Hearing the bishops tell me that the MCC is always present for support, even as I work in the UMC, was exactly the burst of energy I needed to re-energize my ministry.

### **Conclusion**

The WCC provides a place to start working to promote peace and nonviolence. Ideally, the church would model nonviolent relationship because of its common goal to be followers of Christ. As we

learned in our Drew sessions regarding the history of ecumenism, the church has at least ignored, if not caused, much of the violence in the world.

Thinking critically about the WCC has led me to understand more deeply the ways in which the church upholds violence. The church should be held accountable for this, and work to promote peace. Violence against women, and all forms of violence, must be a topic of discussion, preaching, and teaching in the church. Violence as a health crisis, and all forms of violence, should be addressed as a tangible problem with tangible solutions that the church can help to implement. Family violence, and all forms of violence, should be eradicated by educating people about building healthy relationships and managing anger and power in responsible ways. Violence toward persons with disabilities, and all forms of violence, should be addressed by facilitating dialogue among persons with and without disabilities to raise awareness. Peace and nonviolence will be demonstrated by the church when it loves, listens to, and learns from, all people.

Violence seems to be insurmountable on a structural level. However, the WCC has shown me systems that uphold peace in its quest for justice. In the meantime, I am convinced that truly loving people as Jesus did, without judgment or regard to social factors, has groundwork upon which peaceful structures can be built. Listening to the stories of those I meet lays a foundation of dialogue upon which nonviolent relationships can be built. Learning all I can, and talking with others about my experience, constructs a framework within which more love and listening can take place, helping to perpetuate the cycle. By building peaceful, nonviolent structures of justice, and filling them with constructive relationships, we empty the structures built on violence and injustice.

**In “Re-centering the Ecumenical Movement in Spirituality” the facilitators, Wendy Robins and Myra Blyth, used art as an entry point to a conversation about spirituality as the conjunction of theology, prayer and practical Christian life. They had us view several works of secular and sacred art, determine which pieces really spoke to us and which pieces we had difficulty engaging with, then discuss our points of view in small groups. I learned some valuable lessons as we began to share our small group discussions with the larger group. It became apparent that religious dialogues need not be about right or wrong – my way or your way.**

**Perhaps some of us try to move too quickly to unity. Maybe we need to learn to live in the process of discovering differences. If/when we learn to accept and respect differences, then the process of discovering differences. If/when we learn to accept and respect differences, then we can learn to share instead of trying to meld. In melding we lose something.**

**(Carol Lynn Patterson, Assembly participant from the DST)**

## ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT: TRANSFORMING THE WORLD?

Paulette Thompson-Clinton

### Introduction

It was truly a privilege to have the opportunity to attend the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Porto Alegre, Brazil with over 30 of my Drew colleagues under the leadership of Wesley Ariarajah. He is a long-time employee and friend of the WCC who has wide experience in the ecumenical world and whose remarkable humility defies the reach of his global antenna as well as his keen intellect, storehouse of knowledge, and wealth of experience. In addition, he appeared to know virtually all of the movers and shakers at the Assembly, and they knew him as well!

I was not certain what to expect at this gathering of over 4000 people, most of them Christians from all over the world. What would the World Council of Churches reveal itself to be? What exactly is the Ecumenical Movement? What was going to happen at the Assembly? How would it feel to worship together across cultures and to pray the Lord's Prayer simultaneously in multiple languages? How relevant and useful would the various *Mutirão* and plenary sessions be? Would the Assembly actually equip us with the spiritual and practical resources to embark upon the transformation of our communities, with theme, "*God, in your grace, transform the world*", prayerfully pleaded? I was ready to begin this journey to discover the answer to these and other questions. Throughout the Assembly, I had many interesting experiences at various levels – personal, in *Mutirão* in Drew session, in plenary sessions, milling about in the Exhibition Hall, in the buses, and at dinner in and around Porto Alegre. Each of these encounters contributed meaningfully to my learning in some way.

In this paper, I would like to reflect generally on the trinitarian relationship between the World Council of Churches, the Ecumenical Movement and the Assembly. The overall thematic context that will frame my work is the tension that exists between theory and practice in the ecumenical movement. In other words, I am interested in examining the relationship between the preponderance of talking, meeting and gathering that takes place *vis à vis* the concrete, on the ground realization of the plans that are talked about. Of course, this phenomenon is not limited to religious circles, but since this is our current context we will confine ourselves to this realm. Thus, the central question to be explored is "In what concrete ways did the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly advance the goals of the Ecumenical movement around the world?" Put another way, what differences will be evident in the lives of the Christian masses in various countries around the world as a result of the Assembly? These two queries beg a third, even more fundamental question: What is the goal of the Ecumenical movement with regard to the daily lives of Christians around the world and the issues that affect them, and what role does the World Council of Churches play in meeting this goal? The first part of this discussion will focus on the theoretical framework of the ecumenical movement, as seen through the eyes of top WCC officials. The second part of the paper will present my insights and observations from the various programs I attended at the Assembly. I will conclude with an attempt to integrate the two perspectives to see where it is on the continuum from theory to practice; from ideal to reality; that the Ecumenical movement stands.

### Ecumenism and the World Council of Churches

It will be helpful to begin this discussion with definitions of *ecumenical* and *ecumenism*. From the on-line dictionary I consulted ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)), the definitions of ecumenical which best fit our context are "of or relating to the worldwide Christian church" and "concerned with establishing or promoting unity among churches or religions." Ecumenism is "a movement promoting unity among Christian churches or denominations" or "a movement promoting worldwide unity among religions through greater cooperation and improved understanding". Yet another entry stated that ecumenism is "the doctrine of the ecumenical movement that promotes cooperation and better

understanding among different religious denominations: aimed at universal Christian unity”. Four out of these five definitions contain the word ‘unity’. Thus, we may infer that the quest for unity is at the heart of the ecumenical movement. In fact, the home page of the WCC website indicates that Christian unity is the goal of the modern ecumenical movement. We can also deduce that promoting understanding and cooperation among people of different Christian denominations is a main thrust of the movement. To be sure, there were numerous opportunities for dialogue and coming together at the Assembly, activities which aid greatly in increasing understanding and cooperation among people with different viewpoints. However, with regard to the ultimate goal of unity, I observed much less consensus in the various Assembly proceedings. This is an area where the disparity between the ideal of ecumenism and what is attainable is glaring.

This tension was perhaps most cogently elucidated in the captivating report of the Moderator. He forcefully asserted that “the ecumenical movement is currently in a dilemma, wavering between integration and disintegration, partnership and fragmentation, advocacy and fellowship, and bilateralism and multilateralism” (p. 12). He further contended that the ecumenical movement is in crisis; that it suffers from a crisis of credibility and relevance, it is too institution-centered rather than people-centered and new life must be breathed into the ossified structures of the movement if the movement is to truly be source of “renewal and transformation”. For me, the crux of the matter is his observation that there is a “widening gap between the member churches and the Council” (p. 9). This is an apt summary, and the analogy that comes to mind is the following one. The Council seems to be trapped in the ivory tower in Geneva, while the majority of the students on the campuses; i. e., Christians in churches as well as other citizens around the world, either remain unaware of the existence or work of the Council, or are unaffected by it. This is a most unfortunate state of affairs for a body whose mission is so noble and benevolent, and founded on the liberating and transformative message of Jesus of Nazareth. The Moderator’s report is a piercing critique of the movement from within, and gives everyone permission to acknowledge what positive gains it should continue to advance and what it needs to crucify.

The General Secretary’s report took an entirely different tack. Perhaps this is as a result of his position in the organization as the top executive who does not want to rock the boat. Instead of highlighting the deficits of the ecumenical movement, he chose to focus on his vision for the movement, which comprises five essential elements. His vision of the ecumenical movement is that it should be “grounded in spirituality, take ecumenical formation and youth seriously, dare to work for transformative justice, put relationships at the centre, and take risks to develop new and creative ways of working” (p. 2). These goals are wonderful in and of themselves. However, I do not experience them as active enough to contain the momentum to push forward the agenda of the movement. To me, they seem to remain stuck in the theorizing and articulation phase. I agree completely that a movement which aims to transform the world ought to be grounded in spirituality. However, this is not a problem for the WCC; it was evident at the Assembly in the rich and varied worship life – morning and evening prayer services, daily bible studies, and the emphasis on spirituality in many of the workshop sessions.

In fact, I would say that worship life is one of the areas where the WCC is most successful. This is very positive and should not be underestimated. Where it breaks down for me is that aside from spirituality, the General Secretary’s vision for the ecumenical movement was not always manifested in the other aspects of the Assembly. For example, though there was a great deal of rhetoric about justice, relationship-building, and youth, I would not describe the resulting theological framework or agenda of the WCC or the Assembly as particularly daring or risky. Concrete examples which come to mind are the very flagrant facts that Communion cannot be celebrated by the entire body together, that the morning and evening gatherings cannot be called “worship”, and the fact that the issue of sexuality; particularly homosexuality, remained decidedly on the fringes and was never a topic highlighted at large gatherings. To be sure, many of the litanies were very powerful and spoke to issues of injustice against humanity, creation, etc. Many of the songs, coming from all over the world, spoke to oppressive situations in various cultural contexts. Yet if I had to characterize the overall theology of the WCC as it manifested through the worship life, I would characterize it as overly spiritual and not very transformative. Even the very theme of the conference, “*God in your*



*grace, transform the world*” is one that is deeply spiritual, and it obviously speaks to transformation. However, for me, it is a passive prayer at best, one that completely absolves us of any responsibility for acting. It seems to give all power for transforming our world to God. Thus, where does that leave us?

I seem to recall having read or heard somewhere that the themes of the Assemblies have all been prayer-related. Let us take a look at all of these themes to examine this idea more closely.

- 1) **Amsterdam:** *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design*
- 2) **Evanston:** *Christ - the Hope of the World*
- 3) **New Delhi:** *Jesus Christ, the Light of the World*
- 4) **Uppsala:** *Behold, I Make all Things New*
- 5) **Nairobi:** *Jesus Christ Frees and Unites*
- 6) **Vancouver:** *Jesus Christ, the Life of the World.*
- 7) **Canberra:** *Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation*
- 8) **Harare:** *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope*
- 9) **Porto Alegre:** *God in your Grace, Transform the World*

Upon reviewing this list, I would concur that almost all are prayers. As I further contemplate this list of themes, I am particularly struck by the fact that only ONE out of nine specifically mentions human beings, and that is the very first one. The rest are all deeply spiritual but do not convey any immediate sense of humans being responsible for anything at all! Frankly, I find this to be stunning. I wish I could blame my perspective on the post-modern, liberal theological education that I have received at Drew, but that would be unfair and untrue. For many years I have struggled with the apparent dichotomy between belief in the power of God and the belief in the power that God has imbued humanity with both in my observations of other Christians as well as in my own journey to an authentic, liberating and transformative Christian faith. I do not wish to be disrespectful; Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Hope, Freeing, Uniting, Renewing, and Making New, are all very worthy prayer themes. But if this is all they are, as powerful as prayer is, at the end of the Assembly will our most significant achievement be that we have all prayed together for God to come and transform the world? This theme suggests that the solution is not attainable by us humans; that we simply need to ask God to do it for us. We could have done this at home, and saved ourselves and everyone else loads of money and given the Assembly planners a great deal more free time. How much more powerful would it be if we prayed together for God to *transform us* to transform the world? What a small change in wording but such a mammoth change in meaning. It does not shift the focus from God; rather, it channels our faith in God as the God of power and possibility who works in us and through us, the ones that were created in God’s divine image to do great things *with* God and *for* God for the sake of God’s creation.

At one point before we left for Brazil, Ariarajah mentioned that many people say that one of the most memorable aspects of the Assembly is the worship life. I was a bit alarmed by this statement. I too believe that worship is powerful, but I do not have to travel 8000 miles to experience powerful worship – I am looking for something more concrete. Now that I have said that, I do admit to being profoundly moved by the international worship experience at the Baptist Church on Sunday. There were people from over 30 countries present. Representatives from each country gave greetings in their native tongue, pointed out their country on the map projected on the wall, and many left gifts with the host pastor. These words took the place of the sermon, and I can truly say that we did hear the Word of the Lord in many tongues expressed by many members of God’s creation. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience I shall always remember fondly.

Another touted fact was that one of the most exportable elements of the Assembly is the music. Again, this is marvelous because it takes us out of the cultural and musical boxes into which we sometimes push ourselves. However, these results only affect those human beings who are Christian and who find their way into our houses of worship. I feel there should also be exports of this worldwide gathering of churches that reach beyond the people who come to our churches, beyond those who call themselves Christian who have also been created in the divine image of God.

Perhaps the Assembly could aim to export workable strategies that would improve on-the-ground conditions in the areas of poverty reduction, hunger eradication, medical care, violence, etc. These global issues are certainly talked about at the conference and referred to in overarching themes such as the Decade of Violence. Furthermore, if one peruses the handbook, one will find a plethora of *Mutirões* on very practical issues, including HIV and AIDS, Violence in Families, Refugees, Globalization, the Caste System, Land and Water, Racism, and Human Rights, just to name a few. From this partial list, it is clear that Christians on the ground in many places are engaged in working on social justice issues that affect the daily lives of countless people. Yet despite this exciting engagement of how many Christians live out their faith, it is still unclear to me how the workshop sessions support the overall goal of the ecumenical movement.

There appears to be a big gulf between theory and practice, intention and reality, prayer and practice, the body and the people. Yes, talking, meeting and assembling are good, but are these the ultimate ends? How much do these activities really help to move us toward our destination, whatever that is? All right, I give – maybe there was more to the Assembly and there is more to the WCC than I have thus far been willing to admit. Maybe I need to remove my cynical cap and look at the situation more optimistically. To do this, let us next take a look at the content of the Assembly, at what actually took place during the plenary sessions, the *Mutirão*, and the Drew sessions. Although I still believe there a great gulf between the talk and the walk, it is surely not as irredeemable as I may have suggested up to this point.

### Survey *Mutirão* I Attended

The *mutirão* I attended were as follows: Theology, Human Rights and Justice in the Caribbean; AGAPE: Alternatives to Economic Globalization; New Approaches to Inter-Religious Education; Conflict, Poverty and the Fight for Civil Society: An African and African-American Comparative Look; Millennium Development Goals and the Socially Marginalized – a case study from India; and Christian Presence in the Middle East. These topics related broadly to the theme of how Christianity is expressed in different cultures around the World, as well as what Christians are doing in various corners of the globe to promote equality and justice in the name of Jesus Christ. I will begin with a brief description of what I gained from each of the sessions I attended, and will then attempt to integrate these conclusions into the overall theme of this paper, that is, their relationship to the ecumenical movement and the quest for unity.

The content of the first *mutirão* I attended on “Theology, Human Rights and Justice in the Caribbean”, was quite compelling, although the presentation style of the facilitator was poor. The facilitator explored how the struggles of the Caribbean people are conveyed through the art forms of poetry, calypso, and steel drum band music – which can be looked upon as spiritual expressions. Instead of reading the poetry, or playing examples of calypso and steel drum band music for us, the presenter simply read his paper on the above topics, including his interpretation of their relationship with human rights and justice in the Caribbean. When he was finally asked by one of the participants to play an example of steel drum band music, the sample he played was “*On Broadway*”. This piece is clearly not a piece indigenous to the Caribbean, so it was completely irrelevant to the content of the session. Yes, it was a steel drum band piece, but not one that was created by the people to voice their hopes in the midst of their struggle for freedom and justice amidst their oppressed circumstances. I am not sure if the presenter was unprepared or simply pedagogically naive, but it was unfortunately a missed opportunity for the participants to experience first-hand the songs of hope and freedom. Nevertheless, there was one salient point made by the facilitator: while these art forms were created on the streets and were part of popular culture, they have all made their way into the church, as this is where people’s deepest sorrows are often shared and hope for a brighter future is celebrated. Like the psalmist, the people poured out their laments to God and sought for God to lead them to joy once the weeping was over.

The second workshop I attended was on “Alternative Globalization Addressing People and the Earth (AGAPE)”. As the title suggests, its focus is on a new, life-giving form of globalization to replace the current globalization that is destroying people’s lives the world over. Simply put, one

of the main points of this session was that globalization is a matter of life and death. Its proponents believe that globalization will save the world. However, the current approach to globalization is life-stultifying rather than life-preserving. The three-pronged theological critique of globalization by one of the panel members is that it is not people-centered, it is not sustainable, and it is unjust. Another panelist strongly advocated the idea that unpaid caring labor – the care of children and elders, which falls primarily to women – is a vital but unrecognized part of all economic systems. This is a prime example of the intersection of sexism and economic oppression, and how it is all but ignored in the context of globalization. In the AGAPE Background document, a bold challenge for the Assembly was put forth: to move “churches and the ecumenical family...beyond the critique of neo-liberal globalization to develop a vision of a just, compassionate and inclusive world, and to commit themselves to concrete responses rooted in viable alternatives” (p. 2). The stark realities of the grave inequities that exist around the world are noted, as when material overabundance is contrasted with abject poverty. This document advocates a holistic, democratic and people-centered approach to combat the force of globalization. It ends with a list of concrete actions taken and statements by churches in various places on their strategies and plans for improving the areas of jobs, trade, finance, ecology, public goods and services, agriculture, and empire.

The session on “Inter-religious Education” was a very interactive one, in which participants shared their experiences with inter-religious education. The session was led by a team from Hartford Seminary, USA, who presented the results of a survey they had done on inter-religious education in 45 countries. One of the conclusions of this session was that interfaith learning takes place at the experiential level rather than through lectures. The human, personal side of religion is what allows a person from one tradition to connect with another religious tradition. Secondly, it was affirmed by participants that although learning about other religious traditions certainly has its value, what is even more valuable is the coming together of people of various religious traditions to work for social justice, and to address the ills that afflict society (crime, health care, violence, illiteracy and under-education, drugs, etc.) Lastly, the advice given by a Hartford facilitator is that the interfaith perspective should be woven into everything we do in the name of religion rather than being compartmentalized.

The workshop on “Conflict, Poverty and the Fight for Civil Society” was led by two different scholars, each of whose presentation was fascinating in its own way. The first presenter, Andrew Smith, gave a presentation in which he made a compelling yet disturbing comparison between the civil unrest among North African Muslim Youth Immigrants in Paris several months ago and the US government’s response to the mostly poor and African-American citizens affected by Hurricane Katrina. The comparison was very revealing. Both groups suffered from economic marginalization, what the facilitator called ‘fragile citizenship’. In both countries, the citizens in question had only marginal connections to civic procedures that were considered standard by other citizens. Furthermore, there was a great gulf between the people’s self-understanding and the government’s view of them and what time of treatment they deserved. He questioned what role the churches or religion played in the resolution or addressing of the problems of each group of people – both in France and in the United States.

Melanie Harris, a Womanist theologian, also used Hurricane Katrina as the jumping-off point of her presentation, which focused on the intersection of race, gender and poverty. She offered three different symbols of Black women and poverty that arose out of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, all of which represented women or girls who were either needy (a mother begging Federal Emergency Management Agency - FEMA for formula for her baby), expectant (young orphaned girls asking what will you (the government) do for me now?), or women who had fallen through the cracks of the system (rape victims from the Superdome). Harris’ point was that these images let us know that we have dropped the ball – where was the response from the churches? In addition, she insightfully argued that the condition portrayed by these women is one of learned helplessness rather than evidence of faith being used to overcome difficult circumstances. Harris clearly blamed the church for its role in perpetuating this overly spiritualized, passive faith and not inculcating church-goers with the transformative power from God to change their circumstances. Harris linked Jesus’

birth in poverty and his ministry to the least of these to what it is that we, the church should be doing for these people – addressing both their physical and spiritual deficits.

The workshop I found to be most personally engaging was the one on the “Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Socially Marginalized, a case study from India”. I was already quite familiar with the MDGs from working with them at my Supervised Ministry site last year and in other previous experiences. In this session, the Church’s Auxiliary for Social Action, or CASA program, was presented. This was a way to address the Dalits, who are completely socially marginalized. The sad and ironic fact of the caste system in India is that social marginalization is perpetuated by religion and tradition. CASA is the largest organization in India, and supports development initiatives for the deprived. CASA is particularly committed to partnering in order to realize the MDGs in the region. To this end, they have listed specific initiatives under each area of the MDGs, under girded by a theological framework that values the dignity and liberation of all.

The workshop on “Spirituality and Healing” dealt with the Umbanda religion, which began in 1908 in Brazil. Umbanda is a very holistic religion with an emphasis on spiritism, calm and inner peace, and the session offered participants more expansive ways to think about the nature of healing and the manifold ways in which God’s healing power is manifested.

The last workshop I attended was on the theme of the “Christian Presence in the Middle East”. It was led largely by youth, and their energy added decisive vibrancy to the presentation, which contained several skits. A young man named Anton that I met in a small group formed during the Ecumenical Conversations was part of this session, which is the only reason I went to it. I had never given much thought to the Christian presence in the Middle East. The session was quite interesting and broadened my horizons about the unique context of Christianity in the Middle East, which paradoxically is both the birthplace of the faith as well as the region where it is now a tiny minority.

I hope it is obvious that I enjoyed the workshops and learned a great deal from them. Yet it strikes me as I write this that despite the wealth of knowledge and information presented in all of the *Mutirão*, and the wonderful opportunity for Christians to share best practices with each other about how they actualize their faith, something is still missing. It is almost as if the goals of the *Mutirão* were separate and apart from the overall goal of WCC and the Assembly: to seek Christian unity. In more than one workshop, the topic of relating to and working with our neighbors of other faiths came up. This is absolutely necessary in the modern world. Nevertheless, this reality did not seem to be very evident at the upper echelons of the WCC leadership. While it was mentioned in the addresses of the General Secretary and the Moderator, I felt that it was more for the sake of common sense as well as to clarify the point that when we do interact with people of other faiths, we cannot and must not compromise our own truth claims, as asserted by the Moderator. This is not the point I wish to dispute. Rather, I simply wish to point out the disparity between the on-the-ground offerings of the Assembly for those who were not delegates, and the agenda that was articulated by those in power. This disparity is quite reminiscent of the gulf between the WCC and the member churches that the Moderator referred to in his report. I am simply advocating that this gulf be acknowledged rather than ignored, in order for the WCC to more honestly and authentically assess the success of the Assembly and its role in furthering the goals of the ecumenical movement –particularly the central goal of Christian unity.

### **An Alternative Vision of Ecumenical Unity**

To this end, I would next like to offer a review of the Drew Session that was led by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, leader of the Reform Church of America ( and a former WCC staff). His presentation, which focused on challenges to Ecumenism, was extremely illuminating. Several points he made have stuck with me, and are of particular import to the present discussion. First of all, he sobered us with the information that of the five basic Christian families in the USA (Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Historic Protestant Churches, Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches, and Historically Black and churches of other ethnicities), only two are members of the World Council of

Churches. He asserted that the Evangelical and Pentecostals have very little relationship to the WCC. Furthermore, he gave the statistic that only 25% of Christians worldwide are members of WCC churches. Then the straw that really broke the camel's back was the appallingly small number he cited of member churches – 348 – compared to the total number of Christian denominations worldwide – 33,000. This number is positively astounding, although I have yet to validate this number in another source. Granberg-Michaelson affirmed that the fastest growing Protestant churches are in the global South, especially Latin America and Africa, which he touted as the center of World Christianity today.

Granberg-Michaelson further stated that many churches in countries outside of the United States have a highly contextualized Christianity with deep cultural roots, are spiritually vibrant, and are typically not very connected to the church bodies with historic roots, the ones that have membership in the WCC. In contrast, the WCC member churches are the churches that are stagnate; spiritually and number wise. So he raised the question, how do we build bridges between the churches which carry the traditions of the faith but are tending towards spiritual stagnation, and the new churches which are spiritually vibrant but have no connection to and seemingly no desire to connect to the spiritual roots from which they have sprung? Is there a bridge that currently exists between these two sides, or is it all water? This question is at the heart of the search for Christian unity. Granberg-Michaelson's proposed solution is that a wider body than the World Council of Churches needs to be built; one that will be more capable of effectively including all Christians from all cultural and denominational backgrounds all over the world. Citing the fact that the staff and financial resources of the WCC are paltry given the needs it purports to address, one of his names for a new body is called a Global Christian Forum.

I think it is *a propos* to mention that Granberg-Michaelson asserted that interfaith dialogue and relations are a ripe and somewhat unique area for the WCC to concentrate on. However, he admits that this is a difficult discussion to have for reasons that have already been alluded to in this paper. Interestingly, he also indicated that the most exportable products of the WCC are music and worship, yet this is not what the staff members planned for, and this is not what staff members talk about during their own meetings. Thus, he does see spirituality as key to the ecumenical movement's future, and readily admits that many people are more spiritual now that they have left the church! Where, then, does this leave us?

I do not know the current answer to the above question, but in researching for this paper, I actually found a proposed answer for 50 years from now in an article Granberg-Michaelson wrote in 2004 entitled "*An Ecumenical Vision*". This innovative futuristic vision is set in the year 2054, and takes a look backwards at the most significant events in World Christianity over the previous half-century. Due to various factors imaginatively invented by Granberg-Michaelson, the WCC was dissolved in 2010 and has become the Community of Christian Communion (CCC). 2054 marks the year when the 1000-year rift between the Eastern and Western Church is healed, and a joint Eucharist is celebrated at last. One of the most compelling parts of this piece is the juxtaposition of the horrific story of a group of young people from differing backgrounds who was almost completely martyred for the sake of peace in Eastern Europe, alongside the fact that the 11 survivors (89 of the original 100 were killed) had walked through the valley of the shadow of death together yet not could not share together the body and blood of Christ. The survivors deemed this a heresy that they could no longer obey, along with masses of other Christians. I found this to be quite powerful. Additional lessons from this piece which need to be incorporated TODAY are the models for inter-faith cooperation he proffers, especially in the power they harnessed to become powerful vehicles of social and economic justice through church-based self-help projects and micro-enterprise initiatives. This document paints a brilliant picture of a very bright ecumenical future, with the broadest understanding of ecumenism at the core. I wonder who read this document at the WCC and what the reaction to it was. Clearly, Granberg-Michaelson is an extraordinary visionary. His ecumenical vision contains the appropriate combination of prayer and practice, faith and action – power of God and the power of human beings.

As important as I believe the controversy over the common Eucharist is, I am not confused about the fact that if the Eastern and Western churches decided to commune together, that decision will not

provide medicine for those suffering from HIV and AIDS, it will not fill the stomachs of hungry children, it will not bring the socially marginalized into full citizenship, and it will not bring an end to globalization. However, it is undeniably a step along the way to reconciliation of all injustice. If God in God's grace can help us to resolve our theological differences, then surely God can and God will help us work to resolve our concrete, on-the-ground social justice issues as well.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of the day, my conclusion is that the ecumenical movement as a whole, as defined and promoted by the World Council of Churches, is too focused on differences in order to truly advance the ecumenical movement's mission of Christian unity. Unity among the various Christian churches seems to be elusive, as there are many areas of disagreement: communion, baptism, worship, sexuality, ordination of women. Are these the issues that Jesus Christ himself would have us to galvanize around? I think not.

I believe that Jesus Christ, were he alive in the flesh today (and he is in the person of everyone who believes in and follows him), would call us to unite around the mission he came to earth to fulfill: "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1, NRSV). Are we liberating the oppressed and setting the captives free when we are trying to convince someone else that women should be ordained, or that all Christians should be able to celebrate communion together? We may think that we are bringing light to the darkness others dwell in when we engage in such conversations, and vice-versa. However, when you get right down to it, religious belief is really an individual matter. Coming together to get people to change their beliefs about doctrinal points, as critical as we may think they are, is often futile, as we have seen. This is not to denigrate the sweet and lasting victories that have been achieved when colossal ideological or paradigm shifts have occurred among individuals or groups. It is simply a question of what battles most deserve our energy in this day and time.

What are the issues that the denominations of the WCC do agree upon? Where is the common ground? How can we use the opportunities of large gatherings such as the Assembly to pool our collective resources to take a stand for life-threatening issues such as globalization, hunger, poverty, inequitable distribution of resources, infant mortality, clean water, and health care? We do not need to agree about whether or not the body of Jesus Christ is actually present in the communion elements to work together on MDG campaign goals. We simply need to agree that injustice is being done to a member or members of God's creation, and we need to agree that together, we are going to address it. Why can't the ecumenical movement unite around the goal of trying to solve some of the world's major problems, problems that affect all citizens regardless of race, ethnicity or ethnic background, or religion? Let us agree to disagree over communion, baptism and ordination, but agree to agree on poverty, hunger and education. We can each celebrate communion in our own corner of the globe or room, for communion is not even a big enough game to involve all the citizens of the world. Poverty, however, is, and so is infant mortality, as well as HIV and AIDS. If we focus on the larger game we can actually unite, whereas focusing on the smaller problems fractionalizes us and causes us to emphasize our differences.

At the end of the day, if we solve our communion problem, who is really better off as a result? Are people less hungry, do they have cleaner water, are they healthier, and are they freer? I don't think so. I move that the WCC unite around what we have in common, not our differences. If we disagree about whether or not women should be ordained, can we still serve on a team together to build homes for the homeless? If we disagree on what constitutes legitimate baptism, can we still fight together the good fight against poverty and injustice? Are we not all members of God's army? What is God going to ask us about when we walk into the eternal kin-dom upon our earthly demise? I believe the question will be about what act of kindness and justice we did or did not commit, rather than what doctrine we did or did not dispute. If Christians cannot even acknowledge each other as

neighbors and help each other to embrace new life in the midst of death, then we really have problems. No wonder the place of inter-faith dialogue is so precarious on the WCC agenda.

I have another litany of questions to ask as I draw to a close. What did the Assembly concretely do to further the goal of unity, and how would we know if that goal has been achieved? Is the WCC a help or hindrance to unity? What about the ecumenical movement, and the Assembly itself? What if we reframe the goal of the ecumenical movement from a quest for unity to the practical use of Christianity – in fact, religion as a whole – to handle the conditions that cause human misery: hunger and dehydration, poverty, disease, homelessness, and imprisonment? This socially just definition is one that would be intrinsically inter-faith, as concern for one's neighbor is a facet of all of the world's major religions; in fact, it is a tenet of the universal human condition. The God we serve is big enough to handle this goal – and we are big enough to surrender to God's amazing grace to let it transform us so that together, we may transform the world.

**“Called To Be the One Church.”** During the report and discussion of this document there is a pause. We are asked to share amongst ourselves some of the issues that have been raised. I am sitting with a Catholic priest. I share my experiences of receiving communion in Catholic churches “I would serve you if you visited my church,” he says. “But, you wouldn't take communion if I were serving?” I ask. No response. “Is it apostolic succession that is the hindrance?” “Oh, no,” he says, “I don't think so. Perhaps one day the Pope will lay hands on Protestant ministers and the issue will be resolved.” “The Pope isn't going to lay hands on *me!*” I respond. “Well, you never know. It could happen one day.” Not in our lifetime, I am thinking.

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Even though, others, not just the Catholic priest, have said that apostolic succession is not a key issue, I find it in the first question on discerning expressions of “apostolic faith.” It may be that succession is only a small part of this question, but I find it lingering there. In reflecting on these questions we may indeed discover that “apart from one another we are impoverished.” Whether we *feel* this impoverishment enough to desire the enrichment of fellowship with one another transcends human endeavor. Our common Spirit and diverse spiritualities must inspire us to want and need each another”.

( Jeannette Wertz, Assembly participant from the DST)

## ECUMENICAL IDENTITY: THE MAP OF RELATIONSHIPS

R. Bradley Bannon

### Introduction

It seems that the more fundamental a particular concept is, the more difficult it is to discuss. Few concepts are more fundamental than *identity*, so why attempt to examine such a challenging topic? Based upon my experiences and observations at the Assembly of the there is no greater threat to the ecumenical movement than the ability of discerning identity. The basic concept of identity is at once fundamental and also impossibly complex. Philosophically, the question of “who am I?” has plagued thinkers for millennia. This essay, however, is not a philosophical examination of identity, but a pragmatic one. Reflecting on my experiences and observations at the Assembly, I will approach the question of identity on three levels: (1) self identity and voice, (2) Christian identity and ecumenism, and (3) Christian identity and the threat of wider ecumenism.

From a holistic perspective, individuals need to be able to see themselves as who they are, they need to be seen and heard by others, and they need to be in relationship with others without feeling that their identity is improperly threatened. Identity is, by definition, the establishment of borders and the recognition of differences. Ecumenism, however, is about crossing borders and recognizing similarities. It is no wonder that individuals feel that their identity is threatened by the ecumenical movement, because those border lines that they have used to identify themselves have been challenged or even erased. For example, the theology and practice surrounding the Eucharist may be precisely what a Palestinian Syrian Orthodox Christian conceptualizes as their identity over and against their non-Christian neighbors. To encounter a United Church of Christ Christian from New Jersey, USA who is reluctant to even use the word “Eucharist” in favor of “communion” is a considerable challenge to the former’s Christian identity. Wider ecumenism poses an even greater threat. How can a Dalit theologian, whose theology is defined as liberation from Brahminical casteism, sit and dialogue with a Brahmin?

This essay is structured around the three levels of identity mentioned above. It will begin with a litany of questions and reflections surrounding self identity. Central to this concept is a phrase uttered by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury of the Church of England. He said, “Identity is a map of relationships.”<sup>38</sup> The first section, then, will examine the importance of “putting ourselves on the map.”<sup>39</sup> The second section will pose the question: How do others see me on the map? This will examine the challenge of the ecumenical movement in light of the struggle to reach consensus on BEM (Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry), in light of Galatians 3:28, and the attempt to define Christian Identity. The third section will examine identity under the threat of wider ecumenism. It will ask: Can I find my neighbor on the map of relationships? This section will also examine the identity of Jesus. Finally, I will conclude the quest for identity with ecology of questions.

### ΓΝΩΣΕΑΥΤΟΥ – Know Thyself

Who am I? Identity is unfathomably complex. Self identity includes race, gender, age, ability, and myriad other categories outside of our control. It also includes our personal, family, and community history and sexual identity. There are also many elements of choice in our identity: occupation, social context, political affiliation, economic status, religion, education, and countless other factors. Of course, for many people in the world, most of these factors are not elements of choice, which is part of identity, too. Although these are crucial areas for study and exploration, this investigation is not particularly concerned with this aspect of identity, but is instead concerned with what to do with

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<sup>38</sup> Plenary Address on Christian Identity, Feb. 17

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



these identities. As Archbishop Williams pointed out, our identity has a tremendous amount to do with our relationships with others. We might, then, reformulate the question, who am I? and ask instead, can I locate myself on the map of relationships? At least as important as saying “I am a U.S. citizen” is recognizing my relationship *as* a U.S. citizen to, for example, a citizen of Pakistan.

Christians generally recognize the importance of theological education. Ecumenism challenges our understanding of church history and makes it painfully clear that we’ve only followed one thin strand of history. For example, if we trace our history all the way back to July 16, 1054 (the *filioque* split), we realize that there is nearly 1,000 years of our history that is different from our Orthodox Christian neighbors. This helps us to trace the decisions that have already been made for us.

Questions regarding Trinitarianism, the formation of the canon, traditional liturgical practice, and similar decisions have been predetermined. Once we locate ourselves on the historical map of relationships, though, we re-encounter those decisions. Will we allow these decisions to stand for us, to be a part of our identity, or will we deny them? Do we have a choice? Do we lose our voice? Is paradox and contradiction a necessary part of personal identity?<sup>40</sup> What about community identity? If I reject the *filioque* clause, am I also rejecting my Catholic and Reformation identities? We quickly realize how complicated and multi-dimensional this map of relationships is!

The second and crucial step in self-identification and self-realization is being able to profess our identity to others. Can I make my voice heard so that others know who I am and where I stand? For most white men in the U.S., this may not even register as a question. For a Christian woman in Uganda or a homosexual in Georgia, however, this question is central to identity. The mortal risk assumed by a woman like Amina Wadud is every bit a part of her identity as the ideas which place her at risk.<sup>41</sup> How many millions throughout the world would identify themselves as an individual without voice who has been denied the right to identify themselves? Related to this is religious context. As a Christian white male in the USA, it is difficult to imagine what life must be like for a Dalit Christian woman in Bengal. How different is Christianity for a Syrian Orthodox Palestinian refugee versus a Southern Baptist Christian living in a \$500,000 home? This is not to make any sort of value judgment or qualitative statement. I only mean to demonstrate that identity is tremendously dependent upon religious and cultural context. Furthermore, it would be good to remember the warning of K.M George from Orthodox Theological Seminary in Kottayam, India. He said that we must be careful because if we syncretize too much of our identity for the sake of unity, then the map of relationships can become a “spider web of entrapment.”<sup>42</sup> Instead, we must practice what Otto Maduro calls “epistemological vigilance.”<sup>43</sup>

It is important to identify oneself in a way that is self-affirming, theologically sound, and relationally acceptable while acknowledging one’s epistemological location and the biases that accompany it. The importance of being seen and heard is well represented in the Gospel of John, chapter four, with the encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. Elizabeth Joy, a feminist Dalit Christian theologian in India, points out that, “The Samaritan woman saw Jesus for who he was *because* he saw her for who she was.”<sup>44</sup> Social acceptance is a crucial aspect of personal identity and without it, Christian ecumenism is impossible. We cannot come together to celebrate one another as Christians if we cannot first be seen, be heard, and be accepted as we are. Only because Jesus affirmed the Samaritan woman could she see him as he was.

On the other hand, it is important to remember that social rejection, violence, and crossed identities are also an important aspect of identity and Elizabeth Joy is an excellent example of this. Gender, caste, class, Christian identity, and cultural imperialism are all aspects of her identity. But this identity also blesses her with a unique Christian theology. She says, “Christ is the uterus from

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<sup>40</sup> I am reminded of Charles Courtney’s matriculation sermon three years ago. He stated that Seminary graduates are destined to be either heretics or hypocrites!

<sup>41</sup> In 2005, Amina Wadud led a mixed gender salat in NYC, for which she received numerous death threats

<sup>42</sup> Plenary for Church Unity

<sup>43</sup> Maduro, Otto. *Religion and Social Conflicts*.

<sup>44</sup> *Mutirão* session on Dalit Theology, Feb. 15

which life springs because Christ has given new life to Dalit women.”<sup>45</sup> Further, these identities are not left at home, as Vinod Victor revealed. After ordering lunch at a restaurant on campus during the Assembly, his waiter asked him, “are you subsidized or unsubsidized?”<sup>46</sup> We all have multiple identities and it is not unusual at all to have conflicting identities. In a workshop entitled, “South Asia: Envisioning a Transcending Identity,” Victor Azariah, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in Pakistan, explained that anti-Western hostility often manifests as anti-Christian. Even as we sat in the *Mutirão*, we received a report that two Christian churches in Lahore, Pakistan were on fire in response to cartoons printed months ago by a Dutch newspaper. Azariah, to himself as much as to us, asked, “what does it mean to be a Pakistani Christian?”<sup>47</sup>

Because it is so important to be able to express one’s identity, the denial of that right is also an important part of one’s identity. Certainly this can be observed in the USA by numerous homosexual men and women among the clergy. But what about countless Dalits in India who struggle to keep their out-caste status a secret? This issue led to an emotionally charged exchange during the “Wider Ecumenism” workshop.<sup>48</sup> What does it say about Bishop Devasahayam that he can stand and proclaim his Dalit identity? How important is it for other Dalit Christians to hear him profess it? What does it say about Deepak Naik that he can stand, look at Bishop Devasahayam and say “I am a Brahmin and I’m proud of it”? Perhaps it says that he can locate himself on the “map of relationships” but he does not know enough about the plight of Dalits in India to be able to place Bishop Devasahayam on a map and be able to navigate safely into relationship with him. Perhaps the same could be said of the Bishop. Similarly, how can I, as a Christian from the U.S. empire, engage in dialogue with Christians from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Palestine, India, or other neocolonial locales unless I am also sensitive to their neocolonial identity? How different and how similar is it to be a Hindu Brahmin in the UK versus as Dalit Christian Bishop in Chennai, India? It is said that “Christianity in India is like a potted plant in the forest.”<sup>49</sup> Isn’t a Hindu in the UK also like a potted plant? More importantly, what challenges does it present to Bishop Devasahayam to engage in interfaith dialogue with a Hindu? How would it change his identity to do so? This is a tremendous challenge, but it is necessary to articulate such challenges more clearly before dialogue can begin. Clearly, I am raising far more questions than answers, but ecumenical identity is more about process than product. Most of the questions cannot be answered, but it is crucially important to ask the questions and to provide a space for voices to be heard. Personal identity, as I’ve shown, is largely about being seen, being heard, and being acknowledged. Hopefully, acceptance will also follow.

I became most aware of the process of self-identity when I attended the workshop on “Hospitality and Pluralism”.<sup>50</sup> Of the ten workshops I attended, this was the only one that I left early. We participated in an exercise where we were placed in front of a stranger and had 60 seconds to respond to outrageous questions such as “what makes you scared of Muslims.” During our response, our counterpart had to be completely silent. After 60 seconds, we reversed roles. Because of the noise, the format and the rigidity, many of us felt disenfranchised and many of us felt that our voice was not heard. What little we did get to say felt essentialized and I felt as if I would easily be misunderstood. The exercise made me realize how frustrating it is to have someone else dictating what you can or cannot reveal about yourself and what it feels like to be misunderstood. I felt as if my identity had been erased. I don’t know if this is what the leader had intended for me to feel and I regret walking out early. By leaving early, I deprived the leader the chance to make his point. However, to feel disenfranchised and devalued was very instructive. In ecumenical conversations, it is crucially important that all participants feel that they have had an opportunity to express their identity.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Mutirão* session on South Asia, Feb. 15

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Wider Ecumenism: Promise or Threat, February 16, led by Wesley Ariarajah

<sup>49</sup> Bishop D. K. Sahu, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, India

<sup>50</sup> Session #64, Hospitality and the Christian Household: Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Pluralism, Feb. 17

## The Challenge of Ecumenism

Several questions represent challenges to ecumenism. How do others see me? Can I see myself through the eyes of my neighbor? How does my identity change as I see myself through the lens of the “other”? Bishop Azariah from the Church of Pakistan asked, “What can we say together about our unity and Christian identity?”<sup>51</sup> After 50 years, the WCC’s response to that question must be, ‘surprisingly little!’ The BEM commission exploring common ground on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry has been able to come to common agreement only on Baptism. However, several factors mitigate this success. First, only about ¼ of all Christians are represented by the commission and it is doubtful that the other ¾ would agree with it. Second, the fact that they cannot reach a common understanding of Eucharist seems to indicate that they don’t *really* recognize one another’s baptism. After all, if we are all baptized into the Body of Christ, then why can’t we share in the Body of Christ in worship together? Third, it has taken 50 years to come this far, prompting Wesley Ariarajah to suggest, “maybe we are in the wrong business!”<sup>52</sup> But how is it that we all accept St. Paul’s assertion that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus?” (Galatians 3:28)

Further complicating the ecumenical struggle are questions of magisterium and representation. Who has the authority to teach for us? Who has the authority to speak for us? And, perhaps most important, “What can we, as a world council, do that no one else can do?”<sup>53</sup> As I see it, there are both negative and positive aspects to our inability to agree. On the negative side, it reveals our tendency to have “faith IN” rather than “faith THAT”. When we begin to act together, as living examples of our faith, then we tend to disagree very little. But when we begin by asking “what do we believe,” then we encounter more difficulties. Based on the widely varying Christologies of the New Testament, though, this should neither come as a surprise nor as a challenge to overcome. We **should** disagree about our “faith IN”, but we **shouldn’t** let it interfere with our “faith THAT”. The second negative was articulated by Abraham, a layperson from Kerala, who pointed out, “We know so little even about our own DNA, but we think we know everything about God.”<sup>54</sup> However, there are also positive aspects to the fact that it has taken over 50 years to agree on so little. For one thing, it demonstrates a deep commitment of faith, otherwise compromise would be easier. Secondly, it demonstrates a firm commitment to the ecumenical movement, otherwise members would simply give up and leave the frustration behind. In some ways, then, the struggle for ecumenism is actually a major part of *the identity* of the ecumenical movement.

Before moving to the challenge of wider ecumenism, I want to raise an issue of identity uncovered by Ben, a workshop participant from Africa. The question he raised is: Are we Christians all the time or only sometimes? He asked, “Why is the joy we receive while eating ice-cream different from the joy we receive while praying in church? Must it be different? Should we adopt a Christian spirituality when eating ice-cream and an ice-cream spirituality when praying together?”<sup>55</sup> In other words, is our Christian identity a temporal identity? Are we Christians when we eat ice-cream or only in prayer? Is Christian identity static or dynamic? A much harder question to answer is: Are we Christians when we read the bible, or only when we practice it and follow its model? We must ask ourselves: Are our commitments to church doctrine strong all day, all week, and all year? Or do we seem to latch firmly onto those doctrines only when someone suggests we let them go or modify them?

## Wider Ecumenism: Promise or Threat?

To review, the first question we asked ourselves was: Who am I? The second question was: How does my neighbor see me from their perspective? Now we must ask ourselves: Can I see my

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<sup>51</sup> Plenary on church unity, February 20

<sup>52</sup> Wider Ecumenism: Promise or Threat, February 16, led by Wesley Ariarajah

<sup>53</sup> Wesley Bramburg-Michaelson, Drew Session II – Feb 16

<sup>54</sup> Wider Ecumenism: Promise or Threat, February 16, led by Wesley Ariarajah

<sup>55</sup> Ecumenical Conversations Session II

neighbor through his/her own eyes? Can I find my neighbor on the map of relationships? Can I understand their plight? Their concerns? Their situation? And ultimately we must ask ourselves, In what ways is my self-identity challenged by this encounter? Rowan Williams said, “In some sense, every Christian identity, regardless of how it is formulated, is exclusive... on the other hand, the notion of exclusivism is impossible here.”<sup>56</sup> The uniqueness of Christ makes the first part of the Williams statement easy to understand. But to say that exclusivism is impossible requires a faithful theology. As the Archbishop explained, “Christian identity is a faithful identity.” That is, God is faithful to us; we are faithful to God; and we are faithful to one another (love your neighbor as yourself). In other words, Christian faith is relational. This relationship is quite clearly seen in the Epistle of 1 John 4:12, “if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.” If Christian identity is a faithful identity, and if we are to be faithful to the scriptures, then we must be in relationship with people of other faiths. In fact, we must be in relationship with as many people as possible!

As I referenced earlier in the exchange between Bishop Devasahayam and Deepak Naik, the relationship between Dalit Christians and Hindus offers considerable challenges. For that reason, I think it may be helpful to examine this relationship further as a means of investigating identity. Mohan Lorbeer is the principal of Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, India. In the workshop on “Dalit Missiology & Ecclesiology”, he addressed the issue of wider ecumenism in the Dalit liberation movement. He pointed out that Dalits are the only group in India that represents every religion, from Jainism to Islam. Every religion promises them liberation and equality, but all fail to provide either (including Christianity). The caste system has been internalized so deeply that it permeates every aspect of Indian society, says Lorbeer. Because the Dalit movement is a struggle for justice and liberation, he reasons, it must be fully ecumenical. Compellingly, he concludes “In a pluralistic society, the God of Israel unites people of other faiths, but focusing on Christ divides and separates people... [Therefore] we must risk Christ for the sake of Christ.”<sup>57</sup> In other words (if I understand him correctly), we must reformulate our theological language away from the name of Christ in order to give power and meaning to the liberating activity of Christ.

Lorbeer is an excellent example of the role that identity plays in the ecumenical movement. He has a clear notion of self-identity as a Dalit and as a Christian. He also has a clear notion of his neighbor, as a Dalit and a non-Christian. He is comfortable enough and familiar enough with both of these identities to be able to locate each on the “map of relationships” and recognizes that to navigate from one location to another; he must be willing to “risk Christ for the sake of Christ.” Unfortunately, though, he does not seem comfortable enough to make the same connection to Hindu caste members (that is, non-Dalit Hindus).<sup>58</sup> We must ask ourselves, as Christians, what parallels we see between this situation and the biblical witness, particularly Luke’s parable of the Good Samaritan. After listening to a number of Christians at the Assembly, Deepak Naik, a Hindu from the UK, said, “I hear a movement from dead documents to daring faith!”<sup>59</sup> Our faith traditions inspire us to act, but, from the perspective of others, our identity is our actions, not our confessions. The Samaritan in Luke 10 did not claim to be a neighbor, but he was identified that way because of his actions. His Holiness Aram I discussed the relationship between identity and action in the Bate-Papo on February 16. He said, “Christian mission is not a function of the church, it is the self-realization of the church... the church is in the process of becoming and that becomingness is mission and outreach... Our identities cannot be protected by walls. Our identities are outside the walls in our missionary engagements.”

Therefore, we must conclude that wider ecumenism is both a promise and a threat. The threat that it poses to our Christian identity is also the promise of the cross. Only when we are threatened out of our zones of comfort and complacency are we able to fulfill the promise of the Gospel. We must

<sup>56</sup> Plenary Address on Christian Identity, Feb. 17

<sup>57</sup> Mohan Lorbeer: *Mutirão* session on Dalit Theology, Feb. 15

<sup>58</sup> As I reflect, it is possible that I incorrectly attributed some of Bishop Devasahayam’s sentiments to Lorbeer, but this was my impression at the time. Both theologians were on the workshop panel. Of course, it is possible that I misunderstood both men. I certainly respect and admire them both deeply and sincerely.

<sup>59</sup> Ecumenical Conversations, Feb 16

respond to the prophetic words of James and look for ourselves in our relationships with others instead of thinking our identity exists in the mirror: “be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”

### **Conclusions: The Ecology of Questions**

What is identity? Is it actually the categories that I’ve discussed (race, gender, nationality, religious affiliation, sexuality, caste, class, social location, age, etc.)? Or is identity behavior? Why is Jesus the Christ? Is it because of the categories I mentioned before? Or is it because of his actions and his commitment to self-sacrifice for the sake of others? Was Jesus anointed in order to “bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”<sup>60</sup> or was He anointed because He did those things? What, then, is MY identity? Am I a Christian because I say that I am? Am I a Christian because of something that I say or believe or some place that I go on Sundays? Or, am I a Christian because I “bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”<sup>61</sup> What is my identity if I claim to be a disciple of Jesus, but I don’t do those things? What if I do those things but don’t claim to be a Christian? What must we do, as a World Council of Churches, to fully claim our identity as The World Council of Churches? What must *I* do?

**We keep asking ourselves, “What can we do?” But, although our weakness is enough to discourage us, I think that youth do have solutions. Young people can start anything, regardless of where they may find themselves. They can put articles about ecumenism on their homepages. They can perform short dramas or dances about the big issues of the the WCC. They can continue to keep asking question and raising issues about ecumenism. All kinds of decisions about these issues in the WCC are on the shoulders of the older generation that are delegates who have a right to vote. However, many young people are growing up and will someday be the leaders in their churches and in the WCC, as well. In the text that records the testimony of youth members, one youth member of EGGYS tells us, “I do not know what will happen to me, or where each of us will be ten years from now—when we won’t be youth any longer—but I only hope that once in a while we shall tackle these challenges and remind ourselves that we together became a formidable force for transformation.” I think that what this testimony tells is the reason that WCC should keep encouraging the young generation or young adults to engage in the WCC.**

(Suhee Kim, Assembly participant from the DST)

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<sup>60</sup> Luke 4:18-19

<sup>61</sup> Luke 4:18-19

I decided to explore the breakout session on “body theology.” The facilitator began by reading three anti-female body quotes made by early church theologians to demonstrate the negative attitude historically taken by the church towards women and their bodies. From Thomas Aquinas, “As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten”, and from a 13<sup>th</sup> century Dominican friar, “Wanton woman is slippery like a snake and mobile as an eel: so she can hardly be guarded or kept within bounds.” After reflecting on these and other remarks briefly, we were led in a guided meditation to reflect upon a situation in which we felt good about ourselves and were then instructed to draw a figure, which conveys this feeling of well-being. An assortment of colored markers and paper was provided and we were also asked to include symbols, or images of other things that made us feel alive. One of the most compelling questions we were asked to reflect upon was “Is there a way in which the experience of your body speaks of God?” Given that I am artistically challenged, my rendering did not come close to expressing my thoughts, nevertheless, I spoke about the liberation of my body as a metaphor for God’s liberation. Another participant spoke about the playfulness of God. I could see how this exercise might be helpful for women who had never associated their bodies with anything positive. Including God in the reflection might allow them to see their bodies as sacred and special.

(Yvette Vanterpool, Assembly participant from the DST)

The worship service at the Episcopal Cathedral was a welcome break from unfamiliarity. The structure of the service was so familiar; I didn’t miss having an English translation. The hymns were simple and easy to follow. The secretary general of the Anglican Communion, an Irish man, delivered the sermon in English, with a Portuguese translator. He spoke very movingly of the importance of the sea to the Irish people, and I remembered that they, too, had been invaded and conquered. And yet here he is, the secretary general of the English Church, and his boss is Welsh. It is so easy to dismiss them all as a bunch of English white men, and yet it is not so simple even for them. I was relieved and refreshed to finally receive communion, and was eager to tell my roommate, Sharon, a Methodist, how great my experience had been. Sharon, of course, had had an even more intense experience (Sharon is one of my greatest blessings I have found at Drew, and she and I are fiercely competitive with one another). Sharon had gone to the Eastern Orthodox service and they had been invited to receive communion. The liturgy had been the liturgy of St. James, one of the oldest liturgies in the church, and the celebrant had been the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Sharon said she had been so overcome with emotion she had tears streaming down her face for the entire service – and apparently the clergy were able to respond. Sharon was radiant as she described her morning. I guess some things come from the top down, and others come from the bottom up. Perhaps shared communion is one of the latter; it does seem inevitable.

(Anne Rosselot, Assembly participant from the DST)

## REPORT OF THE ECUMENICAL CONGRESS 2006:

### Mission and Ecumenism in Latin America

*São Leopoldo, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil*

12<sup>th</sup> - 25th February, 2006

#### The Idea

During his visit to Brazil in May 2003, then WCC General Secretary Rev. Dr. Konrad Raiser suggested the realization of an ecumenical formation event, parallel to the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly, aimed at multipliers and fostering the interaction of local, continental and worldwide ecumenism. The Lutheran School of Theology (Escola Superior de Teologia – EST) of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (Igreja Evangélica de Confissão Luterana no Brasil – IECLB) welcomed the idea and designed its professor for ecumenism, Rev. Dr. Rudolf von Sinner, to organize the event as its co-ordinator. During his visit in November 2004, the present WCC General Secretary Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia was informed of the planning process, which he received with joy and satisfaction, assuring his full support for the initiative. Given the context of a strongly competitive religious market and the relatively weak expression of the contemporary ecumenical movement in Latin America, it was felt to be urgent to provide a space for ecumenical formation and *convivência* (literally, “conviviality”, but meaning rather “communal interaction”) in order to establish or re-establish trust and cooperation between the vast plurality of churches existing on the continent. The following specific goals were formulated:

- To facilitate an encounter between students of theology of diverse confessions in Latin America and beyond, in an ecumenical *convivência*.
- To offer a basic course in ecumenism, with lectures, seminars and group work, as well as specific visits to the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the WCC and exposure to the local reality through visits to social projects.
- To foster a (re-)contextualization of ecumenical concepts in the seminars and churches through the formation of multipliers.

#### Organization and Finances

The *executive committee* was composed by EST Professors Dr. Rudolf von Sinner (co-ordinator), Dr. Nelson Kilpp (Association of Protestant Seminars in Brazil, ASTE) and Roberto Zwetsch (Latin American and Caribbean Community of Ecumenical Theological Education, CETELA), with the support of Beatriz Nyland (until september 2005) and Márcia Dewes Nunes (from september 2005) of the office of the Dean of Extension. The *extended committee* convened teachers and students from EST, the School of Theology and Franciscan Spirituality (ESTEF), the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), the Anglican Theological Seminary “Dom Edmund Machado Kriskhe” (SETEK) and the John Wesley Institute of the Methodist Church. Initially, also representatives of the Baptist Seminary of Rio Grande do Sul and the Concord Seminary/Lutheran University of Brazil (ULBRA) participated. Lodging was provided by EST, which also gave all infrastructural support, investing around BRL 24.000,00 as its own contribution. Around 30 students were hosted by the Concord Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil (IELB) in shared dormitories and were provided breakfast there, both at a very modest tariff. The City Government of São Leopoldo provided an auditorium at a nearby municipal school and offered workshops, ecological boat trips and a project visit with the participants cleaning part of the river banks. Finally, the secretary of culture, Professor José

Martins, opened the cultural night and played music for the group. The other components of the budget, at a total cost of about BRL 120.000,00 were paid by

**1. sponsoring :**

- ecological mugs: ConTexto Editora e Gráfica [Printing House], São Leopoldo, [www.cebi.org.br](http://www.cebi.org.br)
- Congress bags: Editora Sinodal [Lutheran Publishing House], São Leopoldo, [www.editorasinodal.com.br](http://www.editorasinodal.com.br)
- Posters: Luterprev [Lutheran Pension Fund], Porto Alegre, [www.luterprev.com.br](http://www.luterprev.com.br)

**2. grants from Brazilian research agencies :**

- Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal do Ensino Superior – CAPES, [www.capes.gov.br](http://www.capes.gov.br) [Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel]
- Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico – CNPq, [www.cnpq.br](http://www.cnpq.br) [National Council for Scientific and Technological Development]
- Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul – FAPERGS, [www.fapergs.rs.gov.br](http://www.fapergs.rs.gov.br) [Research Foundation of the State of Rio Grande do Sul]

**3. churches and their cooperation agencies as well as ecumenical organizations:**

- Associação dos Seminários Teológicos Evangélicos – ASTE, São Paulo, Brazil, [www.aste.org.br](http://www.aste.org.br) [Association of Protestant Theological Seminars]
- Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço – CESE, Salvador/Bahia, Brazil, [www.cese.org.br](http://www.cese.org.br) [Ecumenical Co-ordination of Service]
- Comunidade de Educação Teológica Ecumênica Latino-americana e Caribenha – CETELA, São Leopoldo, Brazil, [www.cetela.com.br](http://www.cetela.com.br) [Community of Ecumenical Theological Education of Latin America and the Caribbean]
- Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland – EMW, Hamburg/Germany, [www.emw-d.de](http://www.emw-d.de) [Association of Protestant Churches and Missions]
- Lutheran World Federation – LWF, Geneva, Switzerland, [www.lutheranworld.org](http://www.lutheranworld.org)
- Mission21 Evangelisches Missionswerk in Basel, Basel, Switzerland, [www.mission-21.org](http://www.mission-21.org) [Protestant Mission in Basel]
- The United Church of Canada, Toronto, Canada, [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)
- Vereinigte Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands – VELKD, Hanover, Germany, [www.velkd.de](http://www.velkd.de) [Union of Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Germany]
- World Council of Churches, [www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org) – Ecumenical Theological Education

**Participants**

The Congress was advertised for up to 120 participants, and we had around 130 applications. However, due to restrictions in travel funding and some cancellations for personal reasons, we finally had a total of 99 students participating. 44 were women and 55 men, between 20 and 51 years of age (average 31), members of Lutheran (17), Baptist (17), Presbyterian and Reformed (17), Roman Catholic (15), Methodist (15), Pentecostal (8), Orthodox (3), Anglican (2) and other (4) churches like the Society of Friends (Quakers). One person did not inform her church affiliation.

50 students came from the different regions of Brazil, with a clear emphasis on the Southern region (55%), but with expressive shares also of the Northeast (23%) and Southeast (20%, principally São Paulo). 30 participants came from other Latin American countries and the Caribbean: Argentina (7), Bolivia (4), Chile (5), Colombia (3), Cuba (2), Dominican Republic (1), Honduras (1), Jamaica (2), Nicaragua (2) and Peru (3).

Another 19 came from overseas: Armenia, Cameroon, Denmark, Germany (2), Ghana, Hungary, Indonesia, India, Iraq, Kenya, Latvia, Malaysia, Mozambique, Russia, Serbia-Montenegro, Sri



Lanka, Thailand and Zambia. Differently from the Latin American participants, who applied on their own initiative with their School's recommendation, overseas participants were recruited from principals/deans of theological institutions by staff and the regional consultants of Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) Programme of the WCC. Let me highlight here the excellent cooperation we had with Rev. Dr. Nyambura Njoroge, Dr. José Duque, Fr. Dr. Vladimir Fedorov and Rev. Dr. Wati Longchar, counting on the mediation of ETE Working Group member Rev. Dr. Nelson Kilpp. Apart from the registered participants, the Congress could count on the permanent presence of seven members of the Extended Committee (all teachers of theology) and 20 stewards, mainly students of EST. In this way, 126 persons took part permanently in the Ecumenical Congress.

### **Programme and lecturers**

The complete programme is to be found on the website ([www.est.com.br/congresso\\_ecumênico\\_2006/index.htm](http://www.est.com.br/congresso_ecumênico_2006/index.htm)) and in the "Participants Handbook". The main lectures, roundtables and students' papers presentations are also to be found on the website, provided they have been handed in to us in due time. Papers received until 12<sup>th</sup> February were included in the Congress CD-ROM. All morning lectures and roundtable panels were registered on MP3 soundtrack and two of them (Raiser and Castro) were filmed by a digital camera. 48 speakers presented papers and participated in debates, 12 women and 36 men, members of Lutheran (29,2%), Presbyterian and Reformed (14,6%), Roman Catholic (14,6%), Methodist (12,5%), Pentecostal (6,3%), Baptist, Orthodox, United churches and without information (all 4,2%). 17 (35,4%) came from Brazil, principally from the Rio Grande do Sul state; 8 from other Latin American countries and the Caribbean: Argentina (3), Chile (2), Colombia, Cuba e Uruguai; 23 came from other regions of the planet: France, Germany (6), India (2), Kenia (2), Latvia, Norway, Palestine, Romania, Russia, South Africa (2), Sweden (2) and Switzerland. 18 participants presented research papers (see their summaries in the Participant's Handbook, p. 31-38, and some of the full texts on the CD-ROM), which showed a rich content of qualified research in a wide range of subjects.

### **Evaluation**

From the evaluation forms (90% were filled in and returned to us), and also from personal testimonies we received through e-mail and orally, it can be concluded that the goals were achieved. All items listed were evaluated between "good", "very good" and "excellent", with few people marking "regular" or "unsatisfactory" (the latter were marked, together, by more than 10% of the participants only in terms of "time", indicating the certainly full agenda, "leisure", "accommodation", probably due to the men's dormitories where six persons had to share a room, and "worship", which will be commented below). Beyond offering a very rich content, presented by competent lecturers and debated in group discussions, it was possible to provide a space for ecumenical *convivência* through infra-structure, spiritual life and academic programme, as well as interaction with the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly and other outings (visits to church congregations, visits to social projects, visit to the city of Porto Alegre, the Guaíba Lake and the Sinos River).

### **Interaction with the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly**

The students came back marvelled by the rich diversity of church representatives at the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly, while they recognized how difficult it was to listen and to be listened to and to balance local and worldwide concerns. Interaction with the Assembly was very important to them, as shown by the evaluation form returns, and was particularly meaningful through the Ecumenical Conversations. As happened with other Assembly participants, there were some misunderstandings as to whether they could or not enter the Plenary Hall, given that for practical reasons Congress participants were not registered under the mutirão, but used their Congress badge. However, all who strongly desired to listen to the plenary from within the hall could do so eventually. In general,

co-operation with the Assembly Office, mainly with the co-ordinator, Mr. Doug Chial, and the Local Committee, mainly Rev. Rui Bernhard (local co-ordinator) and Rev. Sonia Gomes Mota (president of the local Ecumenical Theological Education Working Group), was very smooth and encouraging, and the interaction we had during the preparation process was crucial for the detailed planning of the event. The fact that we could use official WCC transport during the days at the Assembly and were given lunch tickets was generous and extremely helpful.

### **Parish and Social Project Visits**

Students were deeply moved by the church visits in local parishes, some of them very humble, where they could interact widely with local Christians during the worship – generally, the ministers opened space for the guests to sing, talk about their background, contribute with a reflection and the like. Students also were impressed both by the appalling poverty and by the dedicated work of project staff during their visits to social projects.

### **Dealing with Differences and Divergences**

Naturally, as an event of this kind, with so many differences and divergences in terms of language, customs, religious confession and academic habits, many transfers, an extensive programme and lodging in two different places, the Congress posed a great challenge to both participants and organization. Thus, inevitably programme adaptations had to be made caused by delays, cancellations and changes of lecturers and the like. However, all items foreseen in the programme could be carried out.

There were some hot debates and mutual questionings, as indeed there should be in such an event, but no major conflicts arose. Written group reports showed a high level of reflection and an open discussion of controversies. The fact that the Congress provided space rather than calling for results certainly helped to explore widely rather than seek a quick – and possibly false – consensus.

### **Praying Together**

Daily common prayer was certainly easier for some, more difficult for others. The European group, for instance, had to work especially hard to include everyone given their differing understandings of what worship is and who can lead it – however, they bore with each other and eventually, after many hours of debate, succeeded in leading prayer with all having their part. This way of staying together until reaching consensus is in itself an important ecumenical experience. In general, it was obvious that, in line with the wider ecumenical movement, worship is certainly a very sensitive area; while some cherish creativity (and there was certainly much of this during the Congress), others are more comfortable with stability. Presumably, it is for this reason that the evaluation form showed less votes in the “excellent” and more in the “regular” and “unsatisfactory” categories than other items; still, more than 80% judged worship life as “good”, “very good” or “excellent”.

### **Motivation**

I believe that there was the excellent motivation among most participants which carried them through the event, and the help of so many persons engaged in the realization of the event, many of them as volunteers (none of the lecturers received any payment, for instance), was certainly crucial. In terms of ETE participants, I can say that most interacted very well with the other students, despite language problems. A few found it hard to come into the dynamics because of their reserved position and because they were sent to participate rather than doing so by their own will. Even so, the group “secured them” within the Congress, avoiding to create outsiders.

### **Looking ahead**

Looking into the future, we have noted with hope the revigoration of the Ecumenical Theological Students' Movement (Movimento Ecumênico de Estudantes de Teologia – MEET, created in 1994, following the 1<sup>st</sup> Ecumenical Journey in Mendes/RJ, in the presence of Rev. Dr. Konrad Raiser) in Brazil and its amplification into Latin America, an initiative the students are undertaking on their own and for which they met independently during the Congress. There are also ideas for teachers of ecumenism to meet regionally (something existing, to my knowledge, only for Roman Catholic ecumenists in Brazil). In the same way, further ecumenical congresses might be organized regionally (e.g. in the Southern Cone). Another sign of hope is the great interest in undertaking research for a Master's or Doctor's degree in Theology, in an ecumenical perspective, as well as writing course work in the field. EST, as other ecumenical institutions like UMESP and ISEDET, will be happy to receive applicants for its degrees, reinforcing their pioneering role and academic excellence in Latin America and beyond.

### **And finally: Thanking**

I would like to thank God, in the first place, for making this event happen and empowering people through his Holy Spirit. The seed has been sown, may God grant that it will grow. My heartfelt thanks also go to the Principal and the administration of the Lutheran School of Theology, namely to the office of the Dean of Extension, for the trust and support given all along the process of preparation and execution of the Congress. Thanks also to the team of Ecumenical Theological Education of the WCC, namely its co-ordinator, Rev. Dr. Nyambura Njoroge, to the Assembly Office, namely to Mr. Douglas Chial, and to the former and present General Secretaries, Rev. Dr. Konrad Raiser and Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, who launched the idea and gave their full support to the event. The presence of Prof. Maake Masango in the opening worship, representing Rev. Kobia, was very important to make this support visible. And, last but not least, I should thank all sponsors who have made this Congress financially viable, among them ETE with a very considerable contribution, in part as received from EMW.

São Leopoldo, 17 April, 2006

Rudolf von Sinner, Co-ordinator