

God in your grace, transform the world

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Some years back, in a rash moment, I embarked on a Masters degree in Ecumenics. On more than one occasion that year, submerged night after night under a sea of documents aiming to reflect ecumenical thinking on everything from *filioque*¹ to feminist ecclesiology², I seriously wondered if I should pack it in and get a life.

The learning that year reinforced for me very powerfully was that words on paper do not always breathe life. Principles, reports and declarations, the precise wording of which – to the compilers' huge credit – is agonised over in preparation, production and translation, still very often fail to convey the genuine agonies and ecstasies that generated them in the first place. As Willem Visser 't Hooft, the WCC's first general secretary wrote, '*...an ecumenical document which represents the outcome of a spiritual struggle cannot have quite the same significance for those who have not shared in that struggle as it has for those who have participated in its creation.*' At the heart of the ecumenical movement is, he declared, '*a meeting of life with life.*'³ I can confirm that the WCC ninth assembly was certainly that.

A meeting of life with life

Held from 14-23 February at the Pontifical University in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the Assembly gathered together around 4000 participants for a programme which included prayer, Bible study, thematic plenary sessions, hearings and committee work. Alongside the committee work and business sessions for the 691 delegates representing 348 member churches, the Assembly ran an ecumenical partnership programme or 'Mutirão' – a Portuguese word meaning coming together – which provided space for a remarkable range of churches, ecumenical organizations and groups worldwide to offer presentations, exhibitions and discussions open to all Assembly participants. On 16 February, (my birthday, as it happened), the 'Mutirão' offered twenty seven gift options waiting to be unwrapped. These included workshops on Spirituality and Healing from an inter-religious perspective, Peace and Reconciliation on the Korean peninsula and a march across the campus in protest against domestic violence. I had gone to the Assembly supported by USPG and Methodist Formation in World Mission, not as a delegate, but as a 'Mutirão' participant, to run a workshop on Ecumenical Formation in Mission with the Revd Garland Pierce who works in Education Ministries with the National Council of Churches in the United States. It was, thank God, well attended and received, with material from *The Christ We Share* pack (new to many) again proving itself to be an impressive and sought after global resource. When not involved in our own workshops, mutirão participants were able, day by day, to plough our own furrows through the Assembly's fields of plenty; plotting out a daily twelve hour timetable of Bible study, plenaries, ecumenical conversations, workshops, worship services and events; all of wonderful diversity and, on the whole, inspiring quality. We were granted observer status at business sessions, but no speaking or voting rights, and therefore had the option to escape. 'It's alright for you,' said my perspiring and page-bound Methodist delegated colleague at one point. 'You're having all the fun!'

She had a point. It is important to remember that Assembly is the 'supreme legislative body' of the WCC, and meets every seven years, its formal purpose being to review programmes and determine the overall policies of the WCC, as well as to elect presidents and appoint a Central Committee which serves as the chief governing body of the WCC until the next assembly. It has serious business to do and not a lot of time in which to do it. So, to answer the inevitable question, 'What did they actually decide?'

a look at the recommendations of the Programme Guidelines Committee is helpful, where four major *areas of engagement* (A-D below) are targeted as future priorities, prefaced in the full text by some additional words of introduction about the more intentional inclusion of young people, women and the marginalized in WCC life, work and decision making. The text below is edited for the purposes of this article. The full text of all Assembly documents and a wealth of other information can be accessed via the WCC Assembly website.⁴

A. Unity, Spirituality and Mission.

17. Here in Porto Alegre, the need of the WCC and its member churches to focus upon the nature of Christian spirituality and the work of the Holy Spirit in the church and the world has become ever more urgent and obvious, both for the integrity of our work for visible unity and in our mission to the world. Unity, spirituality and mission are interrelated, and their mutuality is dependent upon each receiving distinct and dedicated attention by the WCC and its member churches.

B. Ecumenical Formation

18. One of the issues that challenges the whole of the ecumenical movement today is that of ecumenical formation. This is especially true for the students, young adults, laity and women in our churches as they increasingly take on leadership roles in the ecumenical movement for the 21st century.

20. Ecumenical formation also includes the role of the WCC in creating 'safe spaces' for cross-cultural and cross-theological encounter as people to engage in honest encounter around issues that divide our churches and our communities, in particular, to continue the dialogue on issues such as family life and human sexuality.

C. Global Justice

21. Throughout this Assembly there has been the urgent call to work together in the ecumenical movement for a dynamic, global understanding of justice; (transformative justice). Such work will require the WCC and its member churches 'to re-direct our programmes toward more intentionally building truly inclusive and just communities which safeguard diversity, where different identities and unity interact, and where the rights and obligations of all are fully respected in love and fellowship.' (*Report of General Secretary, p.14*)

D. Public Voice and Prophetic Witness to the World

22. In fulfilling its historic responsibility on behalf of its member churches, the WCC is challenged to be a strong, credible ethical voice as it offers a prophetic witness to the world. This voice and witness must be spirituality and theologically grounded if the churches are to be heard among competing voices in the world

23. At this Assembly the urgent need for churches and the WCC to engage in inter-religious cooperation and dialogue was strongly affirmed. In its future engagement with other religions, it is important for the WCC to continue its work in the context of religious plurality and to further develop dialogue and common action related to political or ethical issues.

What outcomes from these areas of engagement might we look forward to? It is claimed that the WCC has made a substantial change in its priorities and culture, not least in moving to a system of consensus decision making.⁵ Many will be watching to see if General Secretary Revd Dr Samuel Kobia's claim that again the WCC '*has affirmed the vitality of the ecumenical movement and the commitment of the churches to the ecumenical vision and goal of unity, and to strive for a more just and peaceful world*' can be justified. We watch this space and commit ourselves to being active players on the pitch, not cynical spectators on the sidelines.

That said, I wonder; do these words from the Assembly papers breathe life? At the end of the eighth Assembly in Harare, the people prayed:

God of unity, God of love,

*What we say with our lips, make strong in our hearts,
What we affirm with our minds, make vivid in our lives.*⁶

For ten days in February 2006, the Pontifical University in Porto Alegre was, it seemed to me, bursting at the seams with passionate speeches, strong hearts, agile minds and vivid, vibrant life. If this kind of activity really is feeding points A-D of the Programme Guidelines Committee's formal recommendations, then we are indeed living in exciting times and holding some fiery documents in our hands. Let us take a look at just two examples – a purely personal selection from this vast Assembly – where the interface between dynamic life and documentation seemed to meet very creatively.

Plenary: Where is God at work in Latin America?

The Latin American churches were superb hosts for this Assembly and their own challenges to the rest of the world were received loud and clear, through puppetry more effectively than through paper. Here is their own description of what their plenary set out to achieve.

In a multi-media presentation, using dummies, music and videos, different characters reflect on the question, 'Where is God at work in Latin America?' Five individuals – puppets – offer their reflections on the most important historical events in Latin America, emphasizing the role of the churches and the ecumenical movement.

TEENAGER (15 years old) – *inquisitive, sensitive, naïve and with a sense of humour. She represents the persistent hope that a society with more justice and freedom can be built. She wants an answer to the question, 'Where is God at work in Latin America?'*

OLD INDIGENOUS MAN – *the oldest character (70 years old), who easily shows his feelings and has lived through some of the most moving moments in the history of the continent. He represents suffering, resistance and longing for freedom. He is in favour of accepting people who are different, the quest for an inculturated Christianity, the demand for the conversion of the conquistadors and a plea for forgiveness from them, so that communion with them can come into being.*

INDIGENOUS WOMAN – *She represents the struggle of women and the reinstatement of the indigenous presence in Amerindian (45 years old). She describes the important campaigns of women in defence of human rights at various moments in the history of our continent. Her long plaits portray the legacy of other women who have responded to the challenges of being a woman in Latin America.*

THE REVOLUTIONARY – *(a reference to the revolutionaries of the 1950s-70s) A character who swings between anger and fun (55 years old). His appearing here points to the activity and ideas of those who acted against military repression, and to the continuing popular struggles in Latin America. He believes that democracy is one of the greatest achievements in Latin America and must be maintained.*

THE PILGRIM (35 years old) – *He is black. He represents the awareness that in vast areas of Latin America the economy and society were based on traffic in black people and slave labour, which was responsible for almost everything that was built and produced. His intention is to discover the challenges arising out of his own people, whose ancestors were so violently destroyed. His remarks show his concern with breaking the chains of injustice, and building up faith in the continent, with the God of the poor and the little ones, the God of life, as its foundation. He recalls the role of the churches and the ecumenical movement.*

Videotaped testimonies included:

- *Julio Cesar Holguin, Bishop of the Episcopal Church of the Dominican Republic, and President of CLAI, the Latin American Council of Churches*
- *Adriel de Souza, Bishop of the Methodist Church of Brazil, and President of CONIC, the National Council of Churches*
- *Elsa Tamez, a Latin American theologian and Professor at the Latin American Biblical University*
- *Nora Cortiñas and Estela Carloto of 'Asociaciones de Madres y Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo', the Plaza de Mayo mothers and grandmothers*
- *Rigoberta Menchu, an indigenous women from Guatemala who, thanks to her personal struggle for justice as well as for her people, received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1992*
- *Antonio Olimpio Santana, Pastor and Director of CENACORA, defender of the rights of Blacks in Brazil and Latin America*
- *Federico Pagura, Bishop (E) of the Methodist Church of Argentina, and President of the WCC*
- *Adolfo Perez Esquivel, also from Argentina, who was arrested by the Military Dictatorship in 1977 and was counted among the missing persons until he reappeared alive 14 months later thanks in part to the efforts of the ecumenical movement. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1992 for his work on peace and reconciliation.*
- *Juan Sepulveda, a Pentecostal theologian and a Professor of Theology in Chile*

What this plenary did so effectively was to present huge issues with a human face. Issues of tortured history, misguided mission, freedoms denied and power abused in the region's history were staged and examined by life size 'human' puppets whose different characters reflected the experience and opinions of a diverse population. Puppet voices were then replaced by taped and live testimonies of Latin Americans who have lived and breathed the very issues and, by responding courageously to them, given hope to the hopeless. When Nobel Peace Prize winner Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchu appeared on screen and Argentinian 'mother of the disappeared' Nora Cortiñas on stage, in trademark white headscarf, the Pontifical Plenary hall nearly exploded in joy, admiration and love. As it did when Archbishop Desmond Tutu dropped in at another time to remind the Assembly, should it ever forget, that through its Programme to Combat Racism, so critical in the struggle to overcome apartheid, *'you were inspired not by a political ideology but by Biblical and theological imperatives.'* Four priority areas of engagement are being worked on post-Assembly. The churches of Latin America reminded us in the most vivid and vibrant way that unless such engagement recognises the transforming grace of God already at work through the flesh and blood of real human beings in their lives, joys, struggles and achievements, points A-D will bear no fruit.

Transforming ecumenism: when young ecumenists network

In 'Called to be the one church'⁷, the WCC declares:

12'. ...churches have not always acknowledged their mutual responsibility to one another, and have not always recognized the need to give account to one another of their faith, life, and witness, as well as to articulate the factors that keep them apart.

13. Therefore, the ninth assembly calls upon the World Council of Churches to continue to facilitate deep conversations among various churches. We also invite all of our churches to engage in the hard task of giving a candid account of the relation of their own faith and order to the faith and order of other churches. Each church is asked to articulate the judgments that shape, and even qualify, its relationship to the others. The honest sharing of commonalities, divergences, and differences will help all churches to pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life. It is time now to take concrete steps.'

Mutual responsibility, deep conversations and honest steps. This kind of language was echoed often and with urgency and sometimes frustration by young ecumenists taking part in the 'Transforming Ecumenism' *mutirão* which ran alongside the official Ecumenical Conversations of the Assembly. One

group in particular spoke persuasively and animatedly about their experience of forming a web community dedicated to ecumenical formation, through which they could meet each other virtually before Assembly and plan their participation. Coordinator Adelle Halliday describes the experience:

We are a group of about 20 young adults, representing every region of the world. We are teachers, pastors, theologians, missiologists, students, and lay leaders. We are all young adults, and we are all deeply committed to the ecumenical movement. We are from Aotearoa-New Zealand, Armenia, Canada, Cameroon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Fiji, Greece, Kenya, Norway, Palestine, Samoa, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Syria, Trinidad, the United States, and Zimbabwe. In our Young Ecumenists Group, we are building on each other's strengths and are striving to learn from one another in our ecumenical encounters. We are all young adults – our average age is 28 – and I believe that all of us in our own ways have already made tangible contributions to the ecumenical movement. Some of us have served on commissions of the World Council of Churches, many of us work for national churches or ecumenical organizations, some are studying ecumenism and missiology, some are involved in local ecumenical projects, and all of us are impacting this current assembly.⁸

'Aren't ecumenical web conversations a bit like Ezekiel's 'dry bones?' mused an older man, somewhat unconvinced. 'Surely they can't be classed as "deep" conversation?' Young ecumenists seemed to think they were. They felt they had encountered each other and discussed candidly common and uncommon issues in faith and church life from their very differing traditions and regions. They felt they had established and maintained a 'covenant' with one another in which they promised to research carefully about and prepare and pray for the Assembly. They felt they had been able to do this through the web in a way that was affordable, and accessible (on the whole), and that this had heightened the expectation and exhilaration of actually meeting each other at the Assembly, when the dry bones became en fleshed in real persons, to their great delight. Adelle reflected:

In some ways, our Young Ecumenists Group is an experimental model within the ecumenical movement; we are considering how we can use e-learning technologies to build faith-based collaborative communities of learning; and how a 'blended' community that integrates online learning and face-to-face meetings might be replicated in the future.

There is no doubt that the use of new technologies and the possibility of creating web communities and virtual gatherings present a myriad of communication options which ongoing discussions about reconfiguring the ecumenical movement need to address. The possibilities for global networking are already vast, but in a way, that is nothing new. The global network that is the ecumenical movement has always been far larger than the WCC. The WCC's challenge now must be to discern how best it can continue to make crucial connections and emphasise critical priorities for churches in a world which has the possibility of creating spaces for ecumenical conversation in ways that could never have been envisaged at Amsterdam. The end of an era? Or the transforming grace of God still at work in the journey 'towards maintaining the coherence of the one ecumenical movement in its diverse manifestations?'⁹

The latter seems good to us. And, we pray, to the Spirit.

¹ *The Filioque Clause in Ecumenical Perspective*. WCC Commission on Faith and Order, 1979

² See, for example, Barot, Madeleine *Considerations on the need for a theology of the place of women in the church*. Ecumenical Review vol 7, no 2, 1955, and *WCC conference on the community of women and men in the church*, Sheffield 1981

³ *An anthology of key texts and voices* Kinnamon Michael & Cope Brian, WCC, Geneva 1997

⁴ <http://www.wcc-assembly.info/>

⁵ more information on how the Consensus process works is available at the website

⁶⁶ quoted by Marlin VanElderen and Martin Conway, *Introducing the World Council of Churches*, WCC, Geneva, 2001

⁷ <http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/official-working-documents/ecclesiology.html>

⁸ http://www.morningsidehighpark.com/wcc/adele_2.htm

⁹ WCC Constitution III Purpose and Function