

Ninth WCC Assembly, Porto Alegre, Brazil, February 2006

Report by the Rev. Dr. Sandy Yule

The 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches was extremely well communicated through the WCC media, though not the secular Australian press, so I shall not attempt a complete account of all that transpired. I note that there were twice as many people attending the Mutirao (about 2,500) as were there in an official capacity (about 700 delegates and another 450 staff, advisers and guests), with at least twenty-five UCA people and forty Australians. 'Mutirao' is a Portuguese word which refers to an occasion when a community of people gather to do something together, such as construct a building. This name was used at the Assembly for the large programme of workshops and presentations on matters of ecumenical concern which accompanied the business transacted by the delegates.

I am grateful to the Uniting Church Assembly and to the Christian Unity Working Group for sending me as Adviser to the UCA delegation. I found this to be a more useful role than would have been anticipated because the Rev. Gregor Henderson was appointed as one of the Decision Recorders and was 'up front' for most sessions. I was able to sit with our other two delegates, the Rev. Elenie Poulos and Ms. Heidi Stabb, next to the United Reformed Church of the UK, the Uniting Presbyterian Church of South Africa and the United Methodists from the USA. We also 'conferred supportively' with the Rev. Peter Overton, the lone Churches of Christ delegate. Our meetings with the other Australians were constrained in time and space but still useful. The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress was represented by Ms. Roberta Stanley and Ms. Cheryl Lawson, with orientation and travel assistance kindly provided by Mr. Graeme Mundine and Bishop Saibo Mabo, representing the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Ecumenical Commission of the National Council of Churches of Australia. The NCCA was further represented by the Rev. Dr. John Henderson (general Secretary) and Mr. John Ball (CWS). The Anglican Church in Australia was represented by Bishop Philip Huggins, Bishop Philip Freier, Ms. Alison Preston, Ms. Rose Elu and Canon Bruce McAteer. Three Australian Orthodox leaders (Archbishop Aghan Baliozian, Mrs. Georgia Papadopoulou and Mr. Theodore Issa) were there representing, respectively, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Etchmiadzin, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East).

The UCA was seen to be making a strong contribution to the whole process of the Assembly through the introduction of consensus decision-making. Dr. Jill Tabart assisted the drafting of the rules governing consensus decision-making procedures. She also gave a briefing to the Assembly which included a 'briefing demonstration', moderated by Gregor Henderson. She was also sitting next to the Moderator for most sessions and was acknowledged for her helpful guidance. The Rev. Professor James Haire was asked to chair an extra session on Economic Justice, partly to demonstrate the method in action. Consensus in the plenaries was mostly achieved without obvious discomfort. It seemed to me that there was great pressure on the moderators to guide the process acceptably (not always achieved gracefully) and great pressure on the microphones, with many sessions concluding with queues of people still waiting their turn to speak. I believe that the 'turn to consensus' assisted people to be heard, rather than the opposite.

The Rev. Dr. Walter Altmann (Lutheran Confessional Church of Brazil) was elected as the incoming WCC Moderator. This Assembly saw a consolidation of the tradition wherein the eight Assembly Presidents are elected on nomination from each of the eight regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, North America, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific). Dr. Soritua Nababan (from Indonesia) was elected as President from Asia. There is a rotation in place for this nomination and this nomination was from the South East Asian region of which we are a part. It was noted by the Orthodox and Indigenous members of the Australian delegations that Australia is overshadowed within Asia, when it comes to representation. Australia is represented on the incoming WCC Central Committee by Gregor Henderson and Alison Preston.

I thought the most disappointing feature of the Assembly was the lack of time for reports/messages from the pre-Assembly meetings of Women, Youth, Indigenous and Disabled networks. This was connected with manifest unhappiness from the youth and the indigenous. Youth delegates were led to expect a youth President, which was not forthcoming. The target figure of 25% youth membership on the Central Committee was not met (actually 15%), as is both customary and inevitable due to the profile of Assembly delegates, from whom selection is required. The figure for women was closer to the target (42%, target 50%). The figure for lay representation was 35% (target 50%). The final outcome included provision for a youth committee to appoint four representatives to accompany the Central Committee, which might settle this perennial source of grievance if churches will fund this youth participation. I thought it sad that so much time and emotion went into this issue when other pressing matters went virtually unaddressed (as was also true at the recent CCA Assembly).

The outcome for indigenous participants seemed less satisfactory to me. The pre-Assembly Indigenous meeting produced a two-page document which did not come before the Assembly. Our Australian delegations had a lunch-time meeting with the Australian indigenous representatives to listen to their view of the situation. They were concerned that there were no indigenous representatives from Brazil, making the welcome to country unavailable. They had specific concerns to express, including a call for the WCC to have indigenous staff placed in Geneva (the Indigenous desk recently moved to Bolivia). They felt, with some reason, that their voice was not being heard at the Assembly and in the WCC processes. Their main satisfaction at the end of the Assembly was that there are six indigenous persons on the new Central Committee (4%). My reflection on this is that the WCC placed indigenous issues high on the agenda at the Canberra Assembly, but that elements in this agenda affronted some of the Orthodox churches. The Orthodox concerns have been well addressed in the fourteen years since Canberra. I believe that the indigenous concerns have not been so fully addressed and that this is work for the WCC in the future.

Perhaps the most significant document from the Assembly is 'Called to be the One Church' from the Faith and Order Commission. This was adopted for circulation to member churches with the request for a response to ten questions. It comes as a statement of what the member churches may be able currently to say together about ecclesiology, about 'being church'. This is to be tested through the responses. The accompanying rhetoric (a significant amount of it from Orthodox delegates) was highly affirmative of the traditional ecumenical search for visible unity.

I participated in the Ecumenical conversation on 'Emerging Forms of Ecumenism' (one of twenty two), chaired by Archbishop Yeznik Petrosian (Armenian Apostolic Church, Etchmiadzin). I thought it was a useful conversation which began to clarify and identify issues. The main tension seemed to be between traditional ecclesiological approaches to Christian unity and 'missional' approaches which I could characterize as 'low-church post-denominational'. I thought this tension was existentially illustrated in the complaint that some of the younger, 'missional' speakers 'had their say and left'. My own reflection stimulated by this conversation was that we need models of pathways to visible unity beyond the alternatives of organic unity or 'parallel play'. In the document, 'Called to be One Church', there is an emphasis upon sharing in the apostolic mission of the church as a possible pathway into greater visible church unity. This approach is worth further exploration.

In addition to the reports from the Moderator and the General Secretary, there were major presentations on Economic Justice, Christian Identity and Religious Plurality (including a welcome to representatives of other World Religions participating in the Assembly), Overcoming Violence, Latin America and Church Unity. It is worth noting that the statements made on Public Issues by the Assembly (eventually seven) were all prepared in draft form prior to the Assembly except for the statement on interfaith dialogue, which was a product of the Assembly itself. The theme of the Assembly, the prayer 'God, in your Grace, Transform the World' became the basis for the message of the Assembly, which is a prayer. The Assembly was also addressed by Archbishop Rowan Williams, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the President of Brazil, the Hon. Luiz Lula da Silva. The United States member churches presented a strongly worded 'confession of failure' which we in Australia should especially notice.

I was very happy with the experience of leading a Bible Study group (one of ninety for the delegates, the Mutirao being offered a larger gathering for Bible Study with leadership including the Rev. Dr. Sione Havea). There was a constant turnover of members in my bible study group, but enough continuity as well. I was pleased that we were able to engage in a conversation about Christian attitudes concerning homosexuality, following 'inclusive' comments from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The passages for study were very well chosen, as they reflected the thematic dynamics of the Assembly quite well.

There were a number of additional meetings between the plenary sessions. I was involved in meetings with the Australian delegates, with the Australians present, with the Asian and South East Asian delegates, with United/Uniting Church representatives, with the World Student Christian Federation contingent, with the extended community of the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, and with the Methodist delegates (while other UCA delegates went to the meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches which was at the same time). I was again reminded of the importance for ecumenical formation of sending our young people to Bossey. The Assembly was also a rich opportunity for individual conversations and encounters too numerous to elaborate. I was accompanied at the Assembly by Fay and by our companions from the NSW Ecumenical Tour group (four weeks of exciting touring, annual leave for me), so I heard quite full reports of many of the Mutirao events.

The theme of the Assembly was a prayer and the reformatting of the worship of the Assembly was an outcome of the negotiations with the Orthodox churches. The opening and closing worship and the morning prayers were organized as inter-church prayer (prayers, hymns, readings and symbolic actions). Evening prayer was organized by specific confessional traditions. There were also opportunities for eucharistic celebrations hosted by specific communions, variously publicized and usually at lunchtime. This arrangement muted the pain of not being able to share the eucharist with all participants. The worshipbook for the Assembly reproduced the resources in five languages, with seventy three hymns. A dedicated choir led worship admirably. There was a real sense of excitement and also of quietness in the presence of God which I experienced in the worship. We were constantly brought back to the reality of the Assembly theme, that the transformation of the world is God's work and that our prayer is to be brought into this work. Whatever we may think in Australia, the world church is alive and well.

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