Reflection

The Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches Porto Allegre, Brazil (14-22 February 2006)

Thomas Finger

To someone dropped out of northern snowdrifts into sunny mid-summer in southern Brazil, it could seem that Mardi Gras, which was just round the corner, was already underway at the worldwide Assembly of the World Council Churches in Porto Allegre. Brightly colored exhibits and posters, rhythmic songs and dances breaking out here and there, the multi-hued costumes and skin colors of the participants – all seemed right at home in this "land of continuous carnival."

This Assembly, the ninth since the WCC's founding in 1948, provided opportunities for celebration: creative worship each morning and evening, a rhythmic Latin American evening, spontaneous fellowship with friends old and new. But it also focused attention on some of the world's most complex and heart-rending problems. For me, privileged to represent Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Church USA, the Assembly provided insight and encouragement but also apprehension and discouragement, a familiar mixture during my 23-year involvement with the WCC and the National Council of Churches (NCC) USA. To sketch that paradox, below I will discuss two developments that are positive and four that raise cautionary questions, and link these two categories by pondering possible future directions. Though I am aware of ecumenical developments among Canadian Mennonites and among other U.S. and Canadian Anabaptists, I will comment mainly from the U.S. Mennonite perspective.

The Decade to Overcome Violence

At the eighth Assembly in Harare in 1998, a small group of Historic Peace Church participants gathered several times. This Assembly marked the climax of the WCC's "Decade in Solidarity with Women." This prompted the HPC visionaries to dream an improbable dream: "What if the Council would dedicate the whole next decade to overcoming violence?" Unlikely

as such a program seemed, a proposal for it was submitted through a German Mennonite delegate, Fernando Enns. On that Assembly's last day, it was announced that this proposal, among many others, had been received and that it would be referred to a committee for consideration.

Amid the 1,000 or so participants packing the hall, Fernando made his way to one of several open microphones, only to arrive about twelfth in line. Not until time had nearly expired did he finally reach the mike. Then, quite unexpectedly, he proposed that so extensive a program should not be referred to a committee but be decided right there when all the delegates were together. Confusion immediately broke out, punctuated by protests that the motion was out of order. But it was not. When a vote was taken, around 70 percent of the delegates committed the Council to this decade-long venture (2001-2010)! The tiny, flickering flame of early Anabaptist vision and courage had suddenly flared up again.

Ever since its founding in 1948, the WCC has considered "War as a method of settling disputes incompatible with the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ."[1] For several decades, however, three different perspectives jostled uneasily among member churches: (1) some wars could be sanctioned by just war criteria; (2) no modern wars could be sanctioned by just war criteria; (3) no wars could be sanctioned by any criteria.[2] By about 1990 support began shifting towards the third option,[3] and the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) has accelerated that momentum.

At Porto Allegre in 2006 it was clear that Mennonites, whether from WCC member churches or not, are expected to take some leadership in the Decade. At present, Hansuli Gerber, a Swiss Mennonite, heads the DOV. Other Mennonites have filled a large share of DOV positions since the beginning. The WCC has held two major consultations on violence with the HPCs: in Biennenberg, Switzerland in 2001[4] and in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2004.[5] Another is planned for Indonesia in 2007, hopefully followed by consultations in Latin America and North America. Ecumenical interest among Mennonites in many places, though quite still small, has escalated over the last few years, due in no small part to The Decade.

However, when someone asks me what the DOV is doing, I find it a bit hard to answer. Like many other WCC ventures, the Decade does not plan and operate its own projects nearly so often as it links up with

existing programs, links some of these to each other, and lends visibility to their efforts.[6] Sometimes, indeed, the WCC conveys the impression that it is doing more than it really is. However, as an ecumenical organization, its main function is to encourage churches to undertake mission tasks and to help draw these efforts together. This means, even for non-member denominations, that the DOV might well assist and enhance their existing programs and help them launch new ones. The door to this kind of WCC involvement is ajar, but those who want to enter may need to take the initiative and knock.

In any case, the WCC is doing much to render visible on a global scale the horrors of violence and the possibilities of nonviolent approaches. It has consistently and publicly opposed US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, and numerous forms of violence in many other places. The WCC is inviting Anabaptist/Mennonites to involvement in the Decade, even if their interest in the Council should extend no further.

Globalization

The WCC well understands globalization's impact on the social ills it opposes. At Porto Allegre, this was evident in many plenaries and workshops, and in the booths of numerous sympathetic organizations. The Council's work with uprooted and indigenous peoples, with human rights, sexism, and racism, and with disarmament, economic justice, and the environment all express this sensitivity.[7] (Again, it is not always clear how directly the WCC is involved in each project it lists.)

The ideology and processes of unbridled consumerism, capitalism, and militarism now seem to encircle the globe unopposed.[8] Until about 1990, a rival existed that could critique some of these theoretically. But most of the Communist world collapsed under the weight of its own failures and internal contradictions. Today the most visible social alternative is probably Islamic – conservative, yet far milder than the militant extremes. But despite its opposition to consumerism, individualism, and immorality, and its moderate missionary success, it feels quite alien to many nations and peoples.

Can any other alternative to economic and military globalization become visible? The WCC's voice is audible and respected in many lands.

Roman Catholics, though not official Council members, participate in many of its activities, and the Vatican's perspective is taken seriously in many places. Pope John Paul II could tell George W. Bush to his face that he opposed the Iraq war. What if these two large bodies, together with the Orthodox and the world's fastest-growing Christian movements – Pentecostals and Evangelicals – could truly work and speak together in the name and the strength of Jesus? What if they could oppose the disastrous undertakings of globalizing and anti-globalizing powers, and construct viable alternatives inspired by a truly Biblical vision, rather than by competing ideological, political, and nationalist agendas?

One might reply that such an alliance would really affect globalization very little. I would counter, with John Howard Yoder, that the Church's primary task is witness, not effectiveness. Yet I would add, with Duane Friesen, that authentic witness means aiming for effectiveness whenever we can.[9]

Scripture and Theology

The WCC's strengths still lie more in the social than in the personal or spiritual realms. Nevertheless, spirituality was often emphasized at Porto Allegre. Small group Bible studies convened once and lively worship services twice each day, and WCC literature claimed that all WCC programs were rooted in Biblical and theological reflection. Yet I found little evidence of the latter.

WCC theology is often called "liberal" in the nineteenth-century or "modern" (Enlightenment) sense.[10] Many people with this orientation suppose that co-operation with those of other religions or none is best achieved by invoking values they all share. Specific references to Jesus, Scripture, or distinctive Christian teachings are generally considered counterproductive.[11] This was confirmed by the scarcity of Biblical or theological references in documents processed at the Assembly, and in the humanistic cast of other documents, or sections thereof, that were called theological. I was able to deal with this issue in one concrete way.

At the beginning of this Assembly 15-20 HPC representatives gathered, as they or their predecessors had at the previous one. A document on the "Responsibility to Protect" was in committee, headed for the

Assembly floor. The main issue was this: When vulnerable populations are at great risk (as in Darfur), should WCC churches support limited military intervention? The current state of interaction between pacifist and just war influences was nowhere clearer than in this document. Though less than 24 hours remained to suggest revisions, several of us leaped to the task.

The document distinguished two groups among WCC members: those who can support violent intervention at times and others who never can. First, we altered negative descriptions of our views into positive ones. To replace the existing description, I wrote: "others can only support intervention by creative, non-violent means." This rendering, along with several others, survived four more revisions into the final draft. Second, we sought to remedy the near absence of Scripture and theology. One of the document's two brief Biblical references was to Jesus' call to "love our enemies." Mention of humankind's capacity for evil followed, presumably implying that we must sometimes shoot our enemies. Directly after "love our enemies" I added: "This is based on the loving character of God, revealed supremely in the death of Jesus Christ for his enemies, absorbing their hostility, and exercising mercy rather than retributive justice (Rom 5:10; Luke 6:36)." This also passed through all revisions unscathed.[12]

Another attempt fared less well. The draft based "the primacy of non-violence" on God's image in everyone. While I agree, "God's image" in WCC documents often connotes no more than human dignity. So I added that everyone "shares the human nature assumed by Jesus Christ in his incarnation, which was raised into eternal life by his Father through the Holy Spirit." While the first phrase made it through, the second was axed early on. Yet it was the only Trinitarian phrase in the document, and the Council staunchly claims to be Trinitarian. This sort of gap between professed theology and social pronouncements continues to bother the Orthodox immensely, and arouses Pentecostal and Evangelical suspicions as well.

Non-Christian Religions

The tendency to downplay a Biblical outlook and to emphasize more widely shared beliefs and values also affects the WCC's approach to other religions. This orientation, however, was not the only one voiced at Porto Allegre. In a

plenary address Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, characterized Christian identity as inhabiting the "place that Jesus defines for us," shaped by the unique biblical narrative and its transmission through the Church. Williams called for "utter commitment to the God who is revealed in Jesus and to all those to whom his invitation is addressed." From this "place" and from what we see there, Christians can begin to interact with non-Christian neighbors. Sometimes, Williams added, we will glimpse in their eyes "a reflection of what we see; they do not have the words we have, but something is deeply recognizable." His Christocentric orientation acknowledged some similarities and points of contact among religions.

Another, perhaps more prevalent, WCC perspective emerged in a discussion led by WCC staffer Hans Ucko and former InterFaith Director Wesley Arajah. Beginning from the definition of "ecumenical" as "the whole inhabited earth," they argued that restricting the term to Christians is narrow and that the ecumenical movement should include other faiths. (I have observed "ecumenical" shifting from *intra-Christian* towards *inter-faith* for at least 15 years.)

However, intra-Christian ecumenical gatherings, where many participants still disagree with or hardly know each other, do provide crucial common reference points for interaction. Everyone involved claims allegiance to Jesus Christ and the Scriptures at the least. These provide sources and standards for challenging and learning from each other. In such gatherings, too, the Source can be not only discussed but experienced through worship, prayer, and mutual encouragement. However, if inter-faith ecumenism replaced intra-Christian ecumenism, such gatherings would be far less frequent. What would provide common reference points for discussion and action? The Ucko-Arajah outlook posits a universal religious awareness that includes common moral implications, much as does standard Protestant liberalism. Not surprisingly, it emphasizes social, ethical, and rational commonalities rather than Christian distinctives.

In my view, Anabaptism's stress on following the radical Jesus has more in common with Rowan Williams' approach: starting with God's revelation in Jesus, and from that "space" interacting with other religions. Witnessing through deeds, especially through communal life, enables Christians to move into and share socio-cultural spaces occupied by other

religions. It helps them share a Christ who is not modeled after Caesars and empires, but who is concerned about the marginalized and reverses worldly values. This is the Lord who became a Servant and whose lordship differs greatly from the dominating lordships of this world. Those who follow this Servant-Lord as servants will take time to learn from others about their cultural and religious spaces, and interact with them in those contexts.[13]

The world needs radical, visible alternatives to economic and military globalization. These appear far more concretely and vividly in Jesus' teachings, person, and kingdom than in general humanistic affirmations, however valid. Christians who start from there can find contact points with many values in other religions. They can converse in those vocabularies whenever appropriate. Unless they express their convictions too loudly or insensitively, and too little through attitudes and deeds, most non-Christians will probably respect them for their authenticity. A recent example is the enormous outpouring of support throughout the Muslim world for the four Christian Peacemaker Team members abducted in Iraq.[14]

Baptism

Although this subject was not very visible at the Assembly, WCC literature calls it quite important. Baptism was thoughtfully addressed in a WCC-Catholic Working Group Report made available to all participants,[15] but apparently not much discussed. The Council's own study, "One Baptism: towards Mutual Recognition of Christian Initiation," underway since 2001, was supposed to reach completion shortly.[16]

The WCC has long recommended that recognition by all other churches of the baptisms performed in every church provides a basis, or even the primary basis, of Christian unity. Recognition means far more than acknowledging that some folks baptized as infants turn out to be fine Christians. Unless the forthcoming study changes things, it means accepting *all* baptisms performed by all other churches as valid. It means affirming their standard practices, not simply some of their products.

Nevertheless, WCC documents affirm that believers' baptism was the New Testament practice.[17] Many mainline churches now recognize it was widely prevalent until the fourth century, and as a result they now affirm only one sacrament of initiation: baptism itself.[18] Moreover, most

mainline churches today recognize the need for committed members who can articulate their faith. Some of their leaders, though still allowing infant baptism, accept that it belonged to a bygone "Christendom model" of society and recommend believers' baptism for much the same reasons as Anabaptist/Mennonites do.[19]

Although State Churches are much less common and less powerful than in the Reformation, I still feel that acceptance of all baptisms as true baptisms permits too much identification of the Church with the status quo, too great a blurring of its distinctive character. At this time, then, I find it especially inappropriate to minimize or surrender baptismal convictions for ecumenical unity; but quite appropriate to challenge others to reconsider the value of believers' baptism.[20] Still, as long as WCC studies remain semi-obscure and Mennonites are not members of the World or National Councils, it may remain difficult to make our voice heard.

Evangelicals and Pentecostals

Evangelical presence was conspicuous at the previous two Assemblies, where numerous participants not only identified themselves as such but produced "Evangelical Responses" to those gatherings and raised critical concerns. Hailing mostly from member denominations, they assessed some things positively and were neither as militaristic nor as fundamentalist as many U.S. evangelicals. No such presence was visible at Porto Allegre, though a few WCC press releases spun things otherwise.

Since Harare, the WCC has endeavored to "widen the table" and dialogue with many non-member churches. Its centerpiece has been a "Global Forum," with high non-member participation, that aims to become "a truly representative global Christian gathering" by its next meeting in 2007.[21] Had North American Mennonites the interest and finances, they could have been involved already, as Forum Director Hans Ucko has indicated to me since Harare.[22] Some evangelicals have participated in the Forum and in recent WCC mission consultations, and have become friendlier with Council agencies. However, their near invisibility at Porto Allegre suggests they may be no closer to joining the WCC than before.

Pentecostals have been courted even more zealously since Harare. Yet while Norberto Saracco, an Argentinian Pentecostal, addressed a plenary at

Porto Allegre, their presence was hardly more visible than evangelicals'. But Brazil sports an enormous number of Pentecostal churches. Several, accommodating 2,000 and more worshippers, are very near the hotel where many Assembly participants stayed. However, on Sunday, when local congregations invited Assembly attendees to worship, only one relatively small Pentecostal church signed on. Nearly as many WCC visitors, including important leaders, as church members showed up.

The Future?

From the opening address by Moderator Aram I (Armenian Apostolic Church), WCC leaders often admitted that the Council and its structures were becoming antiquated and losing relevance. Yet despite frequent calls for radical renewal, I witnessed little besides business as usual. To be sure, youth gained a greater voice, indigenous programs a new impetus, and the DOV increasing visibility. Consensus decision-making was adopted, largely in fairness to the Orthodox minority, but no controversial vote tested it. Once again the budget was trimmed and personnel were cut.

Over the decades, however, the World and most National Councils have acquired considerable momentum that will not soon be exhausted. Their openness to new participants is genuine, despite relatively little response. Their openness to at least a few novel programs is witnessed by the DOV.

Many more opportunities now exist for Anabaptists and Mennonites to be involved, as individuals and organizations, and as members and non-members. Many WCC members want to learn more about us. We need neither hide nor compromise our distinctives, for these often arouse the greatest interest. At the same time, we can learn much from others. Amidst today's economic and military globalization, the WCC voices another alternative, potentially amplified by other worldwide voices. Since we can be creatively involved in various World and National Council tasks without unwelcome limitations, we should look for opportunities.

Still, I hardly expect ecumenism's further sweep to be restricted within old-line, mainline movements. My own involvement has coincided with rising interest among communions outside them even as insider enthusiasm has waned. Non-member denominations sometimes seem to outweigh

members in my own Faith & Order Commission, NCC USA. Separatist traditions everywhere are recognizing the desirability, and experiencing the joy, of closer relations with those they used to suspect. Co-operation among these groups will surely spread, much of it beyond old-line channels.[23]

How and where, then, might Anabaptist/Mennonites be involved? Though it sounds somewhat counter-intuitive, it might be partly with Pentecostals. Two weeks after the Assembly, the Mennonite World Conference meetings in Pasadena devoted a program block to global Pentecostal-Mennonite possibilities. Pentecostal participants expressed great interest in Mennonites, and it turned out that around 70 percent of Mennonites worldwide worship mainly in a Pentecostal style.

In June 2004, Mennonite Church USA decided to initiate the first formal approach to another denomination by North American Mennonites, so far as I know, and decided on Pentecostals. In May 2005, three of us met with three representatives of the Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee. It marked the first time that an American Pentecostal denomination approved conversations with another denomination. Moreover, Jim Schrag, MC USA's Executive Director, considered this step important enough to be in the original threesome.[24] A subsequent meeting of about 20 persons, including at least one Church of God Executive Board member, was slated for September 8-10, 2006, in Evanston, Illinois.

Why should Pentecostals and Mennonites be interested in each other? Many Mennonites desire a dose of Pentecostal energy and enthusiasm, especially in mission. As Jim Schrag outlined to Church of God representatives, MC USA seriously intends to become a more missional church. Some Pentecostal leaders, alternatively, worry that their movement, especially in North America, has sunk too deeply into middle- and upper-middle class mores, materialism, and militarism.

About a century ago, at their origins, Pentecostals were lower class, marginalized folks, as were the original Anabaptists. Also like Anabaptists, they expected converts to live on a high spiritual and ethical plane, and to reject "worldly" behaviors. Moreover, though most Pentecostals no longer know it, the great majority of these founding groups were pacifist. Some Pentecostals are now rediscovering those roots. A (pan-)Pentecostal Peace Fellowship, despite some initial opposition, is growing rapidly.[25] Some

Church of God in Christ leaders recently founded "The Life Together Institute for Peace," whose vision and commitments resonate strikingly with Anabaptists.[26] To be sure, the likelihood of Anabaptist/Mennonites even slightly slowing the materialistic and militaristic momentum within the gigantic Pentecostal movement can seem extremely improbable. However, ten years ago the possibility of the WCC devoting a whole decade to overcoming violence would have seemed preposterous.

Today, Anabaptist/Mennonites are being invited to play a role in shaping the world's fastest-growing Christian movement, which already plays, and undoubtedly will play, a significant role in the ecumenism that will mainly flourish, if I am right, outside mainline ecumenical channels.

It would be foolish to glamorize Pentecostals and ignore tendencies that irritate Mennonite sensibilities: not only materialism and militarism, but emotionalism and prophesyings that sometimes surge beyond control. And, as some MWC leaders at the Pasadena meetings complained, proselytism that sometimes aims, underhandedly, at members of their own and other congregations. As well, a complete prognosis of Mennonite ecumenical prospects would have to consider the burgeoning relationships with Catholics,[27] formal meetings with Lutherans,[28] initial contacts with the Orthodox,[29] and many other recent events. For now, I hope that these reflections on the Ninth WCC Assembly have provided some information, inspiration, and cautions for those interested in such ventures.

Notes

[1] See Salpy Eskidjian, ed., *Overcome Violence: a Programme of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC 1997), 11.
[2] Ibid., 13-17.
[3] Ibid., 18-23.
[4] For the papers, see Fernando Enns, Scott Holland, and Ann Riggs, eds., *Seeking Cultures of Peace* (Geneva: WCC, 2004).
[5] See Scott Holland, "A Peace Church in the World," *Messenger* (Church of the Brethren), December 2005, 8-10. For an overview see Fernando Enns, "The Peace Church: Dialogue and Diversity," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 23:3 (Fall 2005): 15-18.
[6] Updated information on the DOV and its activities is available at www.overcomingviolence.org.
[7] For an overview, see *From Harare to Porto Allegre, 1998-2006* (Geneva: WCC, 2005).

[8] I am critiquing "unbridled" capitalism, not capitalism in every conceivable form.
[9] Duane Friesen, *Artists, Citizens and Philosophers* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2000), 39-42.
[10] I use "liberal" because the WCC's guiding theology hails, in significant measure, from 19th-century liberal Protestant theology and its American offshoot, the "social gospel." Though I critique some of its tenets, I do not mean to characterize liberal theology or liberalism of other kinds negatively in all respects.
[11] A good example is the "Programme to Overcome Violence: Assumptions and Principles" itself (in Eskidjian, 24-29).
[12] To humankind's capacity for evil, I added that this capacity affects even those who seek to make peace, and that therefore Scripture presents a new anthropological norm, Jesus' peaceful way, and urges us to work towards it through the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly, none of this was accepted.
[13] For fuller explanation of this approach, see my *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 275-89; and my contribution to a National Council of Churches USA symposium, "A Mennonite Theology for InterFaith Relations," in Mark Heim, ed., *Grounds for Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 69-92. During eight of my years on the NCC Faith & Order Commission I have been in Study Groups on InterFaith relations.
[14] I traveled to Iraq in December-January, 2002-2003, on a Christian Peacemaker Team that included Jim Loney, one of the four captives. For Muslim response, see, e.g., "Action and Activism: a week of Palestinian calls for the release of CPT hostages in Iraq" (Press Release, *International Solidarity Movement,* December 8, 2005 [http://electroniciraq.net/news/printer2217.shtml]). On Jim Loney, see Scott Marratto, "Two Photographs," *Common Dreams News Center*, January 30, 2006 (http://www.commondreams.org/views06/0124-20.htm).
[15] "Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism: a JWG Study" in Eighth Report of the *Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches* (Geneva-Rome: WCC Publications, 2005), 45-72.
[16] Briefly described in *From Harare to Porto Allegre*, 42-43.
[17] *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC [Faith & Order Paper #111], 1982), 4.
[18] That is, not baptism plus, or later completed by, confirmation. In baptisms of believers, what is now called confession would take place at the baptismal service.
[19] Especially Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1978). In contrast to the "Christendom model," believers' baptism "does not presuppose the state at all: it was, in fact, developed historically not only without recourse to state benevolence but often in opposition to its pretensions." (197) Kavanagh calls infant baptism "a benign abnormality" (109-10).
[20] See my discussion in *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 170-84.
[21] *From Harare to Porto Allegro*, 26.
[22] Mennonite World Conference has sponsored a few participants from other continents.
[23] A good current example is the launching of Christian Churches Together in the USA, combining Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Ethnic and main-line Protestant communions. Mennonite Church USA is likely to join in a few years. The NCC has not only

been polite towards CCT, but its General Secretary and its Faith & Order Director were on the founding board. The two organizations will likely co-exist, and their members overlap somewhat, for some time.

[24] MC USA representatives were Jim Schrag, Gilberto Flores, and I. We met at the Church of God Theological Seminary in Cleveland, TN, May 26-27, 2005.

[25] The website is www.pentecostalpeace.org. The director is Paul Alexander.

[26] The website is www.templecogic.org. The director is David Hall.

[27] Between 1998 and 2003 representatives from the Mennonite World Conference and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity met five times. The final report, "Called Together to be Peacemakers," is available at www.bridgefolk.net/theology/mwc-pcpcu.php. An abridged text of the same title including discussion questions and other features was published by Pandora Press (Waterloo, ON) in 2005. The Catholic-Mennonite organization "Bridgefolk" publishes a magazine, facilitates communications, and organizes several events, most notably an annual Conference first held in 2002.

[28] MC USA held the first formal ecumenical bilateral conversation of any Mennonite group in North America, so far as I know, with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Representatives convened five times between 2002 and 2004. See the final report, "Right Remembering in Mennonite-Lutheran Relationships" (ELCA and MC USA, 2004). Available at www.interchurchrelations.org/RRALR.pdf.

[29] "Traveling the Tradition," the first discussions between North American Mennonites and Eastern Orthodox, so far as I know, took place on a local level. Session I was held in Reading, PA, in March 2004; Session II convened in Lancaster, PA, on April 15-16, 2005. Each drew about 50 participants, approximately half from each group, many of them laity.

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