

**APPENDIX M**

**REPORT ON THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, 30 AUGUST – 6 SEPTEMBER 2006**

**THE LEGACY OF PORTO ALEGRE**

The Meeting of the Central Committee of The World Council of Churches in Geneva held from 30 August to 6 September 2006 was the first Meeting of the new seven-year cycle of membership and work following the Ninth Assembly held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in February of this year. The Assembly had met in a spirit of commitment on the part of participating churches to strengthen ecumenical relationships and to sharpening a common vision for the ecumenical movement in the twenty-first century. This manifested itself in giving increased attention to the spiritual side of ecumenism alongside existing institutional concerns of the ecumenical movement. A practical expression of this was agreement on strategic cooperation among ecumenical partners for mission, diakonia and service.

**FURTHER CHALLENGES OF PORTO ALEGRE**

There was further an impassioned plea at the Ninth Assembly that WCC make a more structured effort to incorporate the voice of young people committed to the church in the future life and work of WCC. A genuine attempt to do so was made in the Central Committee Meeting in Geneva. More work needs to be done in this area. Porto Alegre also called for an ecumenical assembly, by which is meant a joint or common assembly allowing multiple ecumenical organisations to conduct their respective assemblies in the same time and space. While being suitable to a number of international church families, this was and remains insurmountably difficult for the Anglican Communion as currently constituted. The polity of worldwide Anglicanism is loose and layered with five instruments of unity as expounded most recently in The Windsor Report (2004). I suggest that for Anglicans this will not work.

**THE TASK OF GENEVA 2006**

The Assembly called for Advisors from the member churches for future WCC Meetings. I was asked to represent the Anglican Communion as an Advisor to the 2006 Central Committee Meeting. The task of this Meeting was to prepare the work that the WCC will do over the next seven years. The membership, therefore, was a combination of seasoned campaigners and new arrivals. Inevitably, being at such a point of transition means that there is a settling-in period, and this is not only in terms of content, but also in terms of procedure. Significant responsibility falls to WCC secretarial and administrative staff to ensure smooth running and concrete outcomes.

The pattern of the Assembly is to spend roughly the first half of its Meeting working in particular Sections formulating, discussing and refining recommendations and statements for presentation to Plenary Sessions for their consideration and adoption. This process relies

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heavily on work already done in preparation and also on the emphases which the General Secretary of the day wishes to make. Each day begins with worship in the Ecumenical Centre Chapel or the venue selected for the Sectional gatherings. In the preparatory Sections the language used is English. For Plenary Sessions papers are prepared in French, German and English.

#### **THE EMPHASIS OF GENEVA 2006**

Throughout its history, the WCC has sought to push out the boat in terms of ecumenical study and leadership. It has proved to be a colossal resource for those actively concerned with the totality of witness of the Christian Church worldwide. 2006 marks forty years since The World Conference on Church and Society held in Geneva in 1966. This year's Meeting sought critically to re-visit the area of church and society through a combination of testimonies by Central Committee Members on the theme: What does it mean to be a Christian in our own community within a pluralistic society? and through more extensive lectures offering a critical contemporary view of the theme of the 1966 World Conference: Acting Together for Transformation.

#### **THE SECRETARY GENERAL'S REPORT**

Dr Samuel Kobia, a charming Kenyan Methodist minister, divided his Report into three sections: a reflection on the Middle East in which he reiterated the widespread conviction that the region and the world are at a crossroads. He spoke of the world's responsibility both to Palestine and to Israel: 'They deserve more from the international community than they have received thus far, especially in the fair and impartial application of international law. We need to look beyond the current headlines to the underlying moral issues in the region.' He referred also to the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) as an important expression of solidarity by the ecumenical family. The second section was addressing the matter of emigration and new ecclesiastical realities. Displacement through war, violations of human rights, poverty and environmental destruction have resulted in unprecedented enforced migration and trafficking of human persons. Geneva itself today derives more than 50% of its residents from abroad. The statistical shifts, in altering the relationship between guest and host churches, pose significant questions in regard to any openness to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and any mature grappling with the deposit of histories in the life of churches defining themselves ecumenically or indeed un-ecumenically. The third section addressed WCC plans for developing ecumenical experiences and partnerships in the twenty-first century. One of the ways in which this is to be explored is through new ways of relating to Christian World Communions. (This includes the expansion of WCC assemblies to create space for confessional meetings and the ultimate possibility of a broadly inclusive ecumenical assembly. The problem with this, however, is that step 1 will not obviously lead to step 2; and that the Anglican Communion, for example, which currently is a member does not fit into the category of a confessional church.)

## **THE COMMITTEES**

As an Advisor I had the opportunity to attend a number of the Sectional Committee Meetings. The Programme Planning Committee addressed aspects of the overall programme for 2007-2013 together with projects outline for 2007-2009. These areas included: the relationship between WCC and the ecumenical movement in the twenty-first century; unity, mission and spirituality; public witness, particularly addressing power and affirming peace; justice and diakonia; ecumenical and faith formation; inter-religious dialogue and the whole area of effective communications. The Committee on Public Issues produced a Statement on the war in Lebanon and northern Israel; a Minute of Kosovo; a Minute on the situation in the Sudan; a draft Statement on the conflict in Sri Lanka; a Statement on churches' compassionate response to HIV and AIDS; a Statement on the plight of children in conflicts with a focus on Northern Uganda; a Statement on Just Trade and a Statement on extrajudicial killings in the Philippines. Throughout all of the Committee Meetings I attended there was a palpable tension between the older expectation of having something to say on issues and the newer pressure to do something practical. This fissure is something which the WCC will find difficult to close. I wonder if, in fact, its role is more that of facilitating and stimulating theological debate and offering theological stimulus to others rather than, late in the day, taking on the mantle of activism without ever having 'gone there' seriously enough in its history to date.

## **PLENARIES**

The Plenary which sought most comprehensively to address the relationships between church and society was that held at the beginning of the second week of the Meeting. Dr Conrad Raiser, former General Secretary, spoke of the revolution which had taken place in 1966 when the insights of the social sciences were brought to bear on the theological work of the WCC as it sought to grapple with the relationship between church and society. He argued for policy-oriented dialogue along with Ecumenical Partners combined with an urgency to cut through the antagonisms in the wider international debate. Speakers from the floor reminded the Central Committee that it was not now possible to speak without an active multi-cultural, multi-faith and multi-national dimension.

Dr Puleng Leuka Bula, from the Evangelical Church of Lesotho, took up for the future two issues not covered in Geneva 1966, namely gender and ecological justice. Her thesis was that we need to hold together theology and the practice of the church as we participate in the web of life. She said that Geneva 1966 could not have predicted the threats from technology to life. She challenged directly the trafficking in human beings, human genes and plant life using the arresting word: bioheresy. She developed theologically the active relationship between personhood and ecology along with that between creaturehood and community.

Among contributions from the floor were the following: the essential role of the poor as partners; the gap between Christians and the poor stands in stark contrast to the position of

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Islam and governments in Islamic countries; the silence of the churches as multi-nationals progressively deprive the people of life-forms; the embarrassment of people in Africa continuing to ask for money from the west when there is insufficient structural use of the aid given in the African countries.

Only two of those who had been present at WCC 1966 were at WCC 2006. The malaise of ennui which seems to pervade so much of modern life came across poignantly in a tabled presentation by a young person from Scandinavia. This consisted in the articulation of hopelessness as a defining feature of contemporary youth. The only suggested antidote was the exhortation to consult locally to seek to discover why this was the case. The argument was not so much the one which is always wheeled out, namely that church is boring for young people but the subtler and more pervasive difficulty that fewer people in any case are in church in Northern Europe today and, of course, that includes young people. The conclusion is that much greater concentration will have to be given to matters associated with youth and youth culture before the next Assembly.

### **CONFSSIONAL MEETINGS**

I attended the Methodist Meeting out of solidarity with our own Church of Ireland Covenant with the Methodist Church in Ireland and was welcomed there. It was a delight to see so many Methodists from two dozen countries and churches, including four bishops. 50% of General Secretaries of WCC have been Methodists. Today's General Secretary was very much at home among fellow-Methodists and clearly had their affection and respect. He set before all those present the profoundly Methodist challenges to all Christian people of: what is social holiness? and: what is the relationship between social justice and ecumenism? This led to some hard questions about why the World Methodist Council closed down its Office in Geneva and why the Methodist Church in Brazil withdrew from membership of the Brazilian Council of Churches. Dr Kobia also drew attention to the developing work of Bossey Ecumenical Centre as a place of dialogue, inter-religious encounter and reconciliation. This was more than borne out by the visit which we made to Bossey on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> September when the fresh developments in the curriculum of the Institute were explained to us.

### **OVERVIEW**

This was my first visit to the World Council of Churches. I found it exhilarating and inspiring. I also found that it is an institution, like others, in transition. The request had come through from Porto Alegre that a practical component be introduced into the affairs of WCC. There was a palpable frustration on the part of Members with active experience of difficult situations on the ground that the Inter Faith component was insufficiently present in the perspective of the Central Committee Meeting. To my mind this was a valid and pressing concern. Current and evolving world events suggest a deep tension for those who are faced with opportunities which remain to us to enter into a dialogue of understanding both institutionally and individually with those in Islam who wish to talk. Another concern I have is the assumption that confessional gatherings running in parallel will somehow issue in a

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new-style ecumenical gathering. The strength, to my mind, of WCC has been its independence to be articulate and prophetically combative in a theologically nuanced way. As such it retains the capacity to equip and to support those who seek to usher in the Kingdom of God by challenging those with power to take seriously those without power in the totality of God's creation.

*The Right Reverend Dr MGStA Jackson, bishop of Clogher*

*September 2006*

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