

A photograph of a weathered wooden cross against a clear blue sky. The cross is made of two dark, textured wooden beams. A thick, light-colored rope is tied around the horizontal beam at two points. The background is a soft, clear blue sky, and some blurred, dry grass is visible at the bottom of the frame.

# The Ecumenical Movement **A History from 1948**

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Even before the formation of the WCC, Archbishop William Temple had spoken of the modern ecumenical movement as “the great new fact of our time”.

### **THE FIRST WCC ASSEMBLY: Amsterdam 1948**

The first Assembly came together under the theme *Man's Disorder and God's Design*. This theme acknowledged honestly that human disorder was evident not only in the scars of the Second World War all around them and the portents of cold war which lay ahead, but also in the brokenness of the Body of Christ.

It said clearly that the church had decided to come together in accordance with the will of the Lord of the Church. Where this common way would lead them could not be foreseen. “We acknowledge that He is powerfully at work amongst us to lead us further to goals which we but dimly discern”.

The Assembly expressed the indissoluble connection between unity and inner renewal: “As Christ purifies us by His Spirit we shall find that we are drawn together and that there is no gain in unity unless it is unity in truth and holiness”.

Evangelism was seen as the common task of all the churches, and the present day as “the beginning of a new epoch of missionary enterprise”. Mission and evangelism belong together and condition one another.

The plight of refugees and displaced people became a preoccupation of the Assembly. This was inevitable because of the displacement of people caused by the war and then over 700,000 Palestinians made refugees by the creation of the state of Israel just a few months before. In the years immediately following this Assembly, the young ecumenical structures of the churches devoted great resources in response to the plight of refugees. It was thought then that the problem would be temporary. But that tragically was a false assumption. Ever since the work/ministry of responding to the needs of refugees and displaced people has gone on without diminishing. That has been true also in Australia, beginning with the work of the Australian Council of the WCC, funded significantly by the Christmas Bowl Appeal that began in 1949, and continuing through the work of the Australian Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in Australia.

But back in 1948, the WCC Assembly also saw the emergence of the ecumenical concept of ‘the responsible society’, as opposed to both laissez-faire capitalism and totalitarian communism. “Each has made promises which it could not redeem. Communist ideology puts the emphasis on economic justice and promises that freedom will come automatically after the completion of the revolution. Capitalism puts the emphasis on freedom and promises that justice will follow as a by-product of free enterprise; that, too,

is an ideology which has been proved false. It is the responsibility of Christians to seek new, creative solutions which never allow either justice or freedom to destroy the other”. As an indication that they must have got something right – had taken a balanced approach – the Assembly received quite negative coverage both from the *Wall Street Journal* and from *Pravda*.

It was on 23<sup>rd</sup> August that the Assembly voted for the formation of the WCC. Other procedural tasks included the adoption of a constitution, which described the Council as a fellowship of churches), laying down conditions for membership, outlining programmes.

The Assembly concluded by addressing a Message to the churches, in which the Assembly delegates made it clear they were on a journey, making extensive use of process-oriented language – learning, teaching, becoming. The Message said: “In seeking him (Christ) we find one another. Here at Amsterdam, we have committed ourselves afresh to him and have covenanted with one another in constituting the World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together”.

**Willem Visser 't Hooft** (1900-1985) became the first General Secretary of the WCC. Having been shaped by his involvement in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and by his work as the personal assistant to John Mott, he was ordained in the Netherlands Reformed Church; he also served as an ordained Minister in the National Protestant Church of Geneva. By 1948 he had been General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Formation for ten years.

The first meeting of the **WCC Central Committee** was held in Toronto, Canada, in **1950**. It faced the challenge of coming to some understanding of this new entity that had been created two years before. From this meeting came what is known as **The Toronto Statement**, the first attempt to reflect on the nature of a council of churches – what it is, and what it is not (it is not a super church) – its member churches, and the relationship between them.

**The Third World Conference on Faith and Order** took place in Lund, Sweden in **1952**. It is famously remembered for what is known as ‘The Lund Principle’: that the churches should do together everything except those things that conscience forces them to do separately. Just as significantly, this conference recognised the need to change the nature of theological dialogue between the churches from one of comparison of similarities and differences to one whereby commonality could be found: it marked an evolution from the comparative method to the convergence method.

## **THE SECOND WCC ASSEMBLY: Evanston 1954**

It was the time of the Cold War. This was a new type of war – not between countries, but between two camps, two ideologies: communism and capitalism. The world was also living with the threat of nuclear confrontation. Global war was held at bay, but the conflict was fought in local theatres of war: already there had been the war in Korea.

Thus, it was in a context of global pessimism that the Second Assembly was held under the theme, *Christ – the Hope of the World*.

The member churches of the WCC now numbered 161.

If “staying together” was the motto of the Amsterdam Assembly, Evanston’s was “growing together”. The Assembly was marked by a deep sense of belonging together.

The theme naturally lent itself to theological debate on the Christian concept of hope, and a programme organised around several topics:

- our oneness in Christ and our disunity as churches

- the mission of the Church and those outside its life

- the responsible society in a world perspective – this should be the criteria by which we judge all existing social orders

- Christians in the struggle for world community

  - The WCC was giving increasing attention to “economic and social problems in the economically underdeveloped regions”.

    - urged governments to ban weapons of mass destruction and to abstain from aggression (the Assembly was addressed by the USA President)

- the churches amid racial and ethnic tensions

  - insisted on racial equality, expressing concern about race discrimination and oppression, and undertaking a study on racial and ethnic tensions.

- the laity: the Christian in his/her vocation. Here the Assembly stressed the missionary task of the laity, which “bridges the gulf between the church and the world”.

## **The First Regional Council**

The Christian Conference of Asia began as the East Asia Christian Conference, which was constituted by a decision of churches, national councils of churches and national Christian councils, whose representatives met in Indonesia in March 1957. It was inaugurated at an assembly at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in May 1959. The 1973

Assembly, meeting in Singapore, agreed to change the name to **Christian Conference of Asia** (CCA). It is described as an organ and a forum of continuing cooperation among the churches and national Christian bodies in Asia within the framework of the wider ecumenical movement. Its member churches and member councils (a unique feature) are from countries spanning the region from A-NZ and Australia to Japan and Korea to Pakistan. The Australian members of CCA are the Anglican Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Churches of Christ, the Uniting Church and the National Council of Churches.

### **The Australian Council of Churches**

Following a preparatory meeting in 1945, in anticipation of the formation of the WCC, the World Council of Churches (Australian Section) was established in 1946. It was comprised of the Baptist Union, the Church of England, the Churches of Christ, the Congregational Union, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Religious Society of Friends and the Salvation Army. After the establishment of the WCC the name of the Australian body was changed to the Australian Council of the World Council of Churches, and from this body, the Australian Council of Churches (ACC) was formed in 1960. The Baptist Union was no longer a member, but it was not long before several Orthodox Churches became members of the ACC. It also was not long before some state committees of the ACC became autonomous state councils of churches.

### **THE THIRD ASSEMBLY: New Delhi 1961**

It was to a completely new cultural and religious setting that the WCC went in 1961 for its Third Assembly; and it was there that it gathered under the theme, *Jesus Christ – the Light of the World*.

There was an expanding membership. Twenty-three new churches – eleven African, the Russian Orthodox and other Orthodox Churches – were welcomed into membership. This was to have a major effect on the agenda of the WCC. The WCC was clearly much more than Western churches of an Anglican and Protestant kind.

It was in the religious and cultural context of India, with this particular theme, that the theological questions in relation to understanding other religions began to be addressed by the WCC.

It also proved to be a timely opportunity for the International Missionary Council (IMC) to become part of the WCC as the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism, led enthusiastically by Lesslie Newbigin, who had been a Bishop in the Church of South

India.

This Assembly issued the first Statement on Unity. This was to become a feature of many Assemblies, but in New Delhi the WCC gave this first exposition of the nature of the unity being sought for the one Church.

The Assembly also returned to the original statement about the nature of the WCC. In 1948, the Amsterdam Assembly had declared “The WCC is a fellowship of churches which accept the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour”. However, soon this formulation had given rise to questions, and requests for a clearer definition of the Christ-centredness of the churches’ common calling, a more explicit expression of the Trinitarian faith and a specific reference to the Scriptures. These requests can be understood in the context of increasing Orthodox membership and the IMC merging with the WCC. Thus, at New Delhi there was a re-formulation (that still stands): “a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit”.

### **The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order – Montreal 1963**

This Conference represents another significant step in the development of theological dialogue between the churches, especially by addressing the divisive issue of the relationship between Scripture and tradition and expounding a new understanding.

### **Vatican II**

The Second Vatican Council (1963-65) opened the way for the Roman Catholic Church to become more engaged ecumenically. The theological possibility of that opening was found in the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*), and the ecumenical application of it was worked out in the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*) in 1964.

Formal relations with the WCC began in 1965 with the formation of a Joint Working Group, consisting of an equal number of members appointed by the Vatican and the WCC. It has been re-appointed after every WCC Assembly, and in 2015 church leaders gathered in Rome (22-14 June) to celebrate 50 years of work of the JWG, which they described as one of the ecumenical legacies of improved relations among churches growing from the Second Vatican Council.

Since 1968, the resources for the annual observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity have been jointly prepared by the WCC Faith & Order Commission and the

Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Though never becoming a member of the WCC, the Roman Catholic Church has become a member of two WCC Commissions: The Faith and Order Commission (1968) and the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (2005).

On ecumenical impact of Vatican II in Australia was that the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Hobart became a member of the Tasmanian Council of Churches in 1970., followed a few years later by the Archdiocese of Melbourne and the Diocese of Ballarat becoming members of the Victorian Council of Churches.

### **THE FOURTH ASSEMBLY: Uppsala 1968**

It was towards the end of the turbulent '60s: it was the year of student uprisings, especially in Paris; the year of two assassinations, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King.

At such a time, the fourth Assembly of the WCC met under the theme, *Behold I make all things new*.

It has been described as the “most activist and politically oriented assembly”.

Youth played a vigorous role.

This Assembly proved to be a watershed for the churches' understanding of its many-sided mission in a bustling, broken world. The Assembly proposed the following criteria in evaluating priorities for mission: (1) Do they place the church alongside the poor, the defenceless, the abused, the forgotten, the bored? (2) Do they allow Christians to enter the concerns of others, to accept their issues and their structures as vehicles of involvement? (3) Are they the best situations for discerning with others the signs of the times, and for moving with history towards the coming of the new humanity?

Most notably, the Assembly resolved that the WCC establish a Programme to Combat Racism (PCR). This resolution was taken to the meeting of the Central Committee to implement, and the programme was established in 1969. This action reflected the depth of concern about the sin of racism.

From 1971 the WCC Unit, 'Justice and Service' became the largest unit within the WCC. The PCR was the programme that caused enormous controversy – especially in western countries.

### **ACC Programmes of Aid and Development**

Supporting the Church in service alongside the poor had been a part of the ecumenical mission of the churches in Australia from the beginning. The Christmas Bowl, from

1949, was an annual appeal within the participating churches for support of refugees and other projects of aid and development, both overseas and within indigenous communities.

In 1967, the ACC launched a new programme, *Force Ten*. Local churches and individuals were invited to join and to contribute financially to a different project in ten months of the year – avoiding the Christmas Bowl months of December and January. In 1972, the ecumenical dimension of this programme broadened beyond the ACC member churches when Australian Catholic Relief (subsequently, Caritas Australia) began a joint partner with the ACC in *Force Ten*.

### **Conference on World Mission and Evangelism – Bangkok**

The understanding of mission as expressed by the Uppsala Assembly was reflected also in the next world conference on mission and evangelism. It was the first of these conferences since the IMC became part of the WCC in 1961, although there had been a meeting of the World Mission and Evangelism Commission in Mexico City in 1963. This conference was held in Bangkok at the turn of 1972/1973, and it became famous for its holistic approach to the theme “Salvation Today”, encompassing its spiritual as well as socio-political aspects. It acknowledged the need for contextual theologies and the importance of recognising the fact that cultural identity shapes the voice of those answering and following Christ. The conference reflected its time – a time when Liberation Theology was emerging from Latin America – a time when the socio-political (the justice) dimension of mission was being re-discovered.

### **United Churches**

The ecumenical vigour that characterised this period was also expressed in the formation of several united churches.

The **Church of North India** (CNI), the dominant denomination in northern India, is a [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_church"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_church) \o "United church" united church established on 29 November 1970 by bringing together the main [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant) \o "Protestant" Protestant and Anglican churches working in northern India. The merger, which had been in discussions since 1929, came eventually between the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communion\\_of\\_Churches\\_in\\_India"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communion_of_Churches_in_India) \o "Communion of Churches in India" Church of India, [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_Pakistan"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_Pakistan) \o "Church of Pakistan" Pakistan, [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_the\\_Province\\_of\\_Myanmar"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Province_of_Myanmar) \o "Church of the Province of Myanmar" Burma and [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_Ceylon"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_Ceylon) \o "Church of



Ceylon" Ceylon ( [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican) \o "Anglican" Anglican), the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Church"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Church) \o "United Church" United Church of Northern India ( [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregational\\_church"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregational_church) \o "Congregational church" Congregationalist and [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterian"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterian) \o "Presbyterian" Presbyterian), the Baptist Churches of Northern India, the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_the\\_Brethren"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Brethren) \o "Church of the Brethren" Church of the Brethren in India, which withdrew in 2006, the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodism"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodism) \o "Methodism" Methodist Church and the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disciples\\_of\\_Christ"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disciples_of_Christ) \o "Disciples of Christ" Disciples of Christ [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_denomination"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_denomination) \o "Christian denomination" denominations.

CNI's jurisdiction covers all states of the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_Union"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Union) \o "Indian Union" Indian Union with the exception of the four states in the south ( [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andhra\\_Pradesh"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andhra_Pradesh) \o "Andhra Pradesh" Andhra Pradesh, [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karnataka"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karnataka) \o "Karnataka" Karnataka, [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerala"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerala) \o "Kerala" Kerala and [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamil\\_Nadu"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamil_Nadu) \o "Tamil Nadu" Tamil Nadu) and has 3,000 [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parish"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parish) \o "Parish" pastorates. It is a member of the Anglican Communion.

The **Church of Pakistan** is a [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_and\\_uniting\\_churches"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_and_uniting_churches) \o "United and uniting churches" united church in [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan) \o "Pakistan" Pakistan, which is part of the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican\\_Communion"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican_Communion) \o "Anglican Communion" Anglican Communion and a member church of the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Methodist\\_Council"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Methodist_Council) \o "World Methodist Council" World Methodist Council. It was established in 1970 with a union of [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican) \o "Anglican" Anglicans, Scottish [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterian"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterian) \o "Presbyterian" Presbyterians ( [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_Scotland"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_Scotland) \o "Church of Scotland" Church of Scotland), [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodist"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodist) \o "Methodist" Methodists, and [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutheran"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutheran) \o "Lutheran" Lutherans. It is the only [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Church"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Church) \o "United Church" United Church in [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Asia"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Asia) \o "South Asia" South Asia which involves the Lutheran Church. Though united, it is mainly Anglican in theology and outlook, since from the beginning Anglicans formed the bulk of the membership and most of the

important Sees.

The **Church of Bangladesh** is a church of the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican\\_Communion"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican_Communion) \o "Anglican Communion" Anglican Communion in [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh) \o "Bangladesh" Bangladesh. It is a [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_and\\_uniting\\_churches"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_and_uniting_churches) \o "United and uniting churches" united church formed by the union of various [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian) \o "Christian" Christian churches in the region. It came into being as the outcome of the separation from Pakistan. This started as a movement which focused on language and took shape through the liberation war in 1971, which created an independent Bangladesh. The Synod of the Church of Pakistan on 30 April 1974 declared and endorsed a free and independent status for the Church of Bangladesh. The Church of Bangladesh brings together the Anglican and English Presbyterian Churches.

### **THE FIFTH ASSEMBLY: Nairobi, 1975**

The 5<sup>th</sup> Assembly made history before it even met. It has been the only Assembly for which the venue had to be changed – and with only about six months to make the alternative arrangements. It was to have been held in Indonesia, until it became apparent that a large proportion of delegates probably would not get visas. So, the venue was changed to Nairobi.

The theme, *Jesus Christ frees and unites*, provided the focus for this Assembly.

It has been described as an Assembly of consolidation after the turbulence of the previous one. It re-affirmed the theological understanding that undergirded much that had surfaced in Uppsala. It declared that faith in the triune God and socio-political engagement, that conversion to Jesus Christ and active participation in changing economic and social structures belong together and condition one another.

The Assembly resisted efforts to weaken the PCR and its specific fund and strove to understand and clarify this commitment to action on behalf of oppressed peoples in a more deeply theological way.

The Assembly issued a statement on Jerusalem: advocating that it be a city open to people of three faiths where they can live and meet together; and calling for a settlement to the Middle East conflict in its totality.

The search for a “just, participatory and sustainable society” became a major theme for the ongoing work of the WCC and the broader ecumenical endeavour. Consequently, new emphasis was given to programmes on faith, science and technology, on militarism

and disarmament, on ecology and human survival.

The role of women in both Church and society was a major issue for conversation and debate – for awareness-raising – and some delegates from the Methodist Church in Australia were prominent in placing it firmly on the WCC agenda.

Also, of great significance in this period was the setting up of a secretariat of Dialogue with people of Living Faiths. In 1971 it had become a separate sub-unit of the WCC; but at the 1975 Assembly it was a contentious issue.

The renewal of congregational life was again a significant subject, and concern for sharing resources entered ecumenical discussions.

In the area of Faith and Order, the churches were requested to respond to three agreed statements: 'Baptism', 'Eucharist' and 'Ministry'; and again, there was a statement on unity – the second to be issued by an Assembly.

### **A Uniting Church**

As a great culmination of conversations that had their beginnings in the early years of the century, and more recent detailed negotiations, the Uniting Church in Australia came to formation in June 1977 bringing together the Methodist, most Presbyterian and most Congregational churches. It chose the word 'uniting' to describe itself, rather than 'united', in the expectation that it was one step in a continuing process of organic union.

### **Conference on World Mission and Evangelism - Melbourne**

This conference, in 1980, brought to this part of the world, for the first time, more than 500 mission and evangelism leaders as delegates, consultants and observers from churches in nearly 90 countries. Participants received a plenary presentation on the situation of Australian Aborigines, and the delegates responded with a call to expose the plight of Aboriginal people in Australia as a matter of concern and action for the universal Church. Such a presentation and response gave tangible expression to the theme, *Your Kingdom Come*. Influenced by liberation theologies, the delegates highlighted the radical aspects of the Kingdom and the serious challenge it threw to traditional missiology and mission programmes. Speaking of "God's preferential option for the poor", the conference affirmed solidarity with the poor and oppressed and insisted on the particular role of the poor and churches of the poor in God's mission. It also did remarkable work on evangelism and on the Church as healing community. It stressed that evangelism must be specific and contextual, especially, it needs to denounce injustices in order to make proclamation both credible and trustworthy.

This work, - a focus for the CWME for some time - came to fruition with the document,

*Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation.* Approved by the WCC Central Committee in 1982, this became the official WCC position statement on mission and evangelism. Several concepts emerged from this study: (i). Evangelism and social action go together. (ii) Evangelism must make the good news a reality in the life of the poor. (iii) Evangelism must encourage personal conversion through accepting the saving lordship of Christ. (iv) Evangelism must sow seeds locally in order to develop local churches. This WCC document also challenged member churches to witness to Christ's uniqueness and "cooperate in witnessing to the millions of people who have not yet had an opportunity to respond to the gospel.

### **Australian Indigenous People**

Following the World Mission and Evangelism Conference, in 1981, at the invitation of the ACC, the WCC sent a team to visit indigenous communities in Australia and to raise up their issues of justice. It caused a political storm, especially in Queensland and Western Australia, where the two Premiers refused to meet the visitors. A second WCC team visit occurred ten years later, just prior to the Canberra Assembly.

### **THE SIXTH ASSEMBLY: Vancouver, 1983**

The 6<sup>th</sup> Assembly was the largest so far. There were 4,500 people participating in one capacity or another; and all focussed on the theme, *Jesus Christ – the Life of the World.*

To accommodate such numbers, this Assembly was the first to use an enormous tent for the worship space, and for the next several Assemblies the tent became a central symbol.

The number of participants was boosted by another 'first' at this Assembly, namely, a Visitors' Programme that enabled the involvement of hundreds of local and international visitors, in addition to the delegates of member churches and other church and ecumenical organisation representatives.

A highlight of the Assembly was provided by the fact that, one year earlier, at a meeting in Lima, Peru, the F&O Commission had finalised the convergence document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, which represented wide agreement on these three traditional church-dividing issues. On the basis of the agreement on the Eucharist, a liturgy had been prepared – known as the 'Lima Liturgy' – and this was used for the celebration of the Eucharist during the Assembly.

The document, *Mission and Evangelism*, had been published also the previous year, and now, in speaking of evangelism, this Assembly drew wide attention to Christian witness in the context of worship, in the contexts of culture and religious pluralism, and among

the poor and with children.

On Christian education, the Assembly pressed member churches “to take seriously the ecumenical dimensions of learning and include it in all educational activities and programmes”.

A recommended WCC priority was the engagement of member churches “in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation”, whose foundations were “confessing Christ as the life of the world and Christian resistance to the demonic powers of death in racism, sexism, caste oppression, economic exploitation, militarism, violations of human rights, and the misuse of science and technology”.

There was a night-long vigil to mark the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The uncertainty regarding Bishop Desmond Tutu’s presence (would the South African Government allow him to leave the country?) ended when he arrived late one evening to an enthusiastic welcome given in recognition of his courageous stand against one of those demonic powers: racism.

### **Conference on World Mission and Evangelism – San Antonio**

This conference, in Texas in 1989, was the last in a world dominated by the East-West ideological and economic divide. As in Melbourne, its theme was taken from the Lord’s Prayer, *Your will be done*, to which was added *mission in Christ’s way*.

This was a crucial conference for defining the relationship between ecumenism and evangelization. It saw an ‘inextricable relationship’ between ecumenism and evangelization and postulated that working the way of Christ requires that churches “necessarily join their actions where possible”.

The delegates also emphasized mission in Christ’s way as making the gospel known in deed and word. This emphasis included the new dimension of ecological concerns as part of mission. Further, the conference saw the just use and distribution of land as an important aspect of fulfilling mission in Christ's way.

Meeting in the USA, the conference condemned evangelism (as practised by some) and aid programmes that promote and protect U.S. interests”. But it also endorsed the idea that the mission of WCC involves participation in struggle and suffering; and that (somewhat controversially) this includes the use of power in violent action where nonviolent means “have been tried and crushed”. All this was seen as part of the

missionary task of working for justice.

### **Justice, Peace and Creation**

The 1990s began with the **World Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation** (held in Seoul, South Korea), which affirmed “the full meaning of God’s peace”, and the calling “to seek every possible means of establishing justice, achieving peace and solving conflicts by active non-violence”. It spoke of the need to demilitarise international relations, to promote non-violent forms of defence, to work for the banning of war as a legally recognised means of resolving conflicts, and to press governments for the establishment of an international legal order of peace-making. This commitment was strengthened in an act of covenant “for a culture of active non-violence which is life-producing and is not a withdrawal from situations of violence and oppression but is a way to work for justice and liberation”.

### **THE SEVENTH ASSEMBLY: Canberra, 1991**

The theme was different: *Come Holy Spirit – Renew the whole creation*. It was different because for the first time it was Spirit focussed, and for the first time it was expressed as a prayer.

Again, there was a worship tent, and the worship was very central to the life of the Assembly. But on one Saturday morning it became the cause of great tension, even anger. It was celebrated according to the Eastern Orthodox Liturgy with the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Australia presiding and, following the discipline of the Orthodox tradition, only members of Eastern Orthodox churches were able to receive communion.

Indigenous people had a high profile, and the Assembly produced a statement, “Indigenous Peoples and Land Rights – Move Beyond Words”. In a special section on ‘Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders’, the Assembly stated that it had been “painfully reminded of their struggle for self-determination and self-management ...”.

The Gulf War overshadowed much else and led eventually to a special plenary session. The international ecumenical conference in Seoul during the previous year had expressed the commitment in an act of covenant “for a culture of active non-violence which is life-producing and is not a withdrawal from situations of violence and oppression but is a way to work for justice and liberation”. While the Assembly produced a 10-page document, “Statement on the Gulf War, the Middle East and the Threat to World Peace”, it hesitated to re-affirm that conviction, and showed that there were widely differing attitudes in the churches to the Just War Theory.

The two keynote presentations on the theme – especially the second given by a young

woman theologian from Korea (Chung Hyun Kyung) – raised the issues of Gospel and culture and contextual theology; and the heated discussions that were going on around the Assembly also gave rise to a special plenary session.

A new statement on unity was endorsed by this Assembly: “The Unity of the Church as *Koinonia*: Gift and Calling”, which became known as ‘The Canberra Statement’.

The Assembly had a very significant impact on ecumenical life in Australia, particularly through the engagement of local churches in Canberra, but also across NSW, and to varying degrees in other states, through preparatory workshops during the previous year and follow-up activities throughout 1991.

### **The Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order**

The next world conference on Faith and Order – the first in thirty years – was held in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in 1993. From the Canberra Assembly statement on unity, this conference was focussed on unity as *koinonia*. It was the first F&O World Conference at which Roman Catholic delegates were present members.

### **A Handing on of the Ecumenical Mantle**

In 1988, the General Meeting of the ACC resolved to invite non-member churches to enter into dialogue to explore the possibility of membership of a national ecumenical body. The Roman Catholic Church was the first to respond, followed by the Lutheran Church. After several years of conversation, under the guidance of the ACC General Secretary, David Gill, a proposed Constitution for a National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) was ready to be offered to the churches for consideration. The culmination came in 1994, when the ACC ceased to be and the NCCA was inaugurated. The Roman Catholic Church joined the twelve ACC member churches as foundation members of the NCCA and were joined by the Lutheran Church in 1998. The inauguration Service in 1994 was memorial especially because of the use of a mantle to symbolise what was happening: the handing on of the ecumenical mantle, as Elijah had handed on the prophetic mantle to Elisha.

### **Conference on World Mission and Evangelism – Salvador da Bahia**

The 1996 conference, the last great mission conference of the century, was fully dedicated to the relation between gospel and culture.

The conference called on the churches to engage in mission in ways that always make clear the unity of the church.

Conference members heard from a Russian Orthodox Archbishop a call on the churches

to give a sharp focus to the gospel call for personal repentance in their mission work.

They also heard from Bishop Lesslie Newbigin a strong address in which he took up a recurring theme: the ‘Western free-market culture’ that is dominating the world. While the process of globalisation was “probably irreversible”, he said, the question is whether “the Christian Church can recover its confidence in the gospel to challenge the immense power of the ideology which rules us. ... We are dealing with an idol – the idol of the free market – and idols are not susceptible to moral persuasion”.

The overarching message of the conference was that the gospel, to be most fruitful, must be true to itself – incarnated or rooted in the culture of a people, while at the same time challenging that culture and calling it to account.

### **THE EIGHTH ASSEMBLY: Harare, 1998**

The 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly, with its theme, *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope*, marked the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the WCC.

One significant outcome from this Assembly was the decision to invite the churches to observe the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a ‘Decade to Overcome Violence’ (2001-2010).

Another important matter was the role of the Orthodox Churches within the WCC, and the decision to establish a special commission to address the issues and concerns of those churches.

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary warranted a great celebration, looking back over the fifty years with much thankfulness and to affirm in new ways the role of the WCC. That celebration took place on a Sunday afternoon, and in the midst of the extraordinary rejoicing of the occasion, the highlight was the arrival of Nelson Mandela, who had re-scheduled his programme so that he could be there to thank the churches for all the support given through the years of struggle.

After fifty years, there was some re-thinking about the WCC. In 1948 the member churches understood that the WCC was not a church above them, certainly not the church universal, or ‘world church’. They understood it to be an instrument whereby churches bear witness together in the common allegiance to Christ, search for that unity which Christ wills for his one and only Church and cooperate in matters which require common statements and actions. In 1948, Visser ’t Hooft had described the WCC as “an emergency solution, a stage on the road. ... a fellowship which seeks to express that unity in Christ already given to us and to prepare the way for a much fuller and much deeper expression of that unity”. But what did this mean for the churches’ understanding of



themselves and their relation to other churches?

The 1950 Toronto Statement on 'the Church, the Churches and the WCC' sought to clarify both what the 'fellowship' does not imply and what it does imply. However, by 1998 it was felt that there was a need for a new statement, and so the Assembly received a text entitled "Common Understanding and Vision". It re-affirmed the Basis of the WCC and, while it proposed a re-formulation of the list of the WCC's constitutional functions and purposes, the new wording really clarified the existing ones rather than radically changing them. The significant difference came in a strong new emphasis on the original understanding of the WCC as a fellowship of churches and as a servant instrument of the ecumenical movement. This implied that the Council should concentrate much more on relations with and among its member churches, so that they come to understand the Council not as an external agency conducting programmes apart from them, but as a body of which they are essential members.

### **Global Christian Forum**

At the Harare Assembly, a proposal for a forum of Christian churches and ecumenical organizations was presented and discussed, and the assembly encouraged a process of consultation, and affirmed further work towards the goal of a more effective, more sustaining, more inclusive network of relationships.

This 'forum proposal', as it came to be known, evolved out of the reflection process on the Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC. The proposal was to explore the potential of a forum that would reflect a broader pattern of relationships than the fellowship of WCC member churches. It should bring together churches participating in the ecumenical movement, e.g., WCC member churches, the RC Church, other churches, and Evangelical, Pentecostal and Independent churches, as well as ecumenical and para-church organizations. A small continuation committee became responsible for the process after the Harare Assembly.

In 2000, there was a meeting between the continuation committee and a group of Evangelical and Pentecostal leaders from around the world, to discuss common interest in the forum proposal. Two year later, 2002, there was the first international consultation of about sixty participants from many parts of the world, representing all the main Christian traditions, with a relative majority of Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Independent churches.

From these beginnings has come the Global Christian Forum, which offers new opportunities for broadening and deepening encounters between all the main Christian traditions and their international organisations, and to promote new relationships between

them.

### **Australian Churches Covenanting Together**

At its first meeting in 1995, the newly established Faith and Unity Commission of the NCCA addressed the question: how will the churches honour the renewed commitment they have made to one another in forming the NCCA? So began a proposal for the churches to enter into a covenanting process. Over the next nine years, through broad consultation and discussion, a proposal was finalised – *Australian Churches Covenanting Together* – and then endorsed and celebrated at the NCCA Forum in 2004.

### **Conference on World Mission and Evangelism – Athens**

At the invitation of the Orthodox Church in Greece, the next WME Conference was held in Athens in May 2005. It was the first WME Conference to take place in an Orthodox-majority country.

This was significant, given the difficulties concerning Orthodox membership of the WCC that had come to a head at the Harare Assembly. But in the intervening years, much had been achieved by the work of the special Commission. Nevertheless, the Orthodox Church leaders in Greece feared that the conference might aggravate tensions in their own Church about relations with other churches. They were reported to have received hundreds of letters protesting about the conference with its theme of mission and evangelism, because many Orthodox Christians in Greece and elsewhere are suspicious of mission by other churches in traditionally Orthodox countries. They denounce as proselytism what they see as an attempt to win converts among Orthodox believers. In spite of those suspicions, the WCC is on record as opposing proselytism, urging “those involved in proselytism to recognise its disastrous effects on church unity, relationships among Christians, and the credibility of the Gospel”. The Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Athens welcomed the conference, saying “This is an opportunity to present an image of a modern church and manifest the true values of our faith and culture. We shall set aside the fears of the last century and look forward to new relationships with other churches”.

The theme of the Athens conference was expressed in a prayer and a statement: *Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile* and *Called in Christ to be Reconciling and healing Communities*; and the stated aim was “to provide a space for Christians and churches to exchange their experience and think together about priorities in mission and the future of Christian witness”.

The conference had more than 500 participants: church and mission leaders, theologians and missiologists, as well as youth and others involved in mission from WCC member

churches and mission agencies. For the first time Roman Catholic representatives were there as full members of the CWME. Also, various Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, which do not belong to the WCC, were represented.

The arrival by boat of a 13-foot cross made of olive wood by a Jerusalem craftsman began the conference. Brought from the Middle East and received by people from all over the world, this cross was intended to be a symbol of reconciliation and healing, as well as a symbol of solidarity with Christians in the Middle East. A procession led by the cross to the very spot where the Apostle Paul preached to the Athenians brought the conference to a close.

Before it concluded, the conference issued a letter to the Christian world, in which it called on churches everywhere to become healing and reconciling communities of hope, open to all. "God calls us to be communities of hope. 'Called in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities', we have continued here in Athens the task of defining the kind of community God desires us to become, a community that bears witness to the Gospel in word and deed; that is alive in worship and learning; proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all".

### **THE NINTH ASSEMBLY: Porto Alegre, 2006**

The WCC assembled for the first time on the South American continent, in Brazil, in the city of Porto Alegre, in 2006 for its ninth Assembly. As in Canberra, again the theme was expressed as a prayer: *God in your grace, transform the world.*

The Assembly gathered over 4,000 participants, including 691 delegates from the 348 member churches, together with representatives and observers from other churches, especially the RC Church and some Pentecostal churches.

Addressing the core issue of Christian unity, the Assembly agreed on a new text, *Called to be the One Church*, and urged the WCC and its member churches to give priority to the questions of unity, especially baptism as the basis of that unity.

The Assembly also considered issues relating to religious pluralism, with Archbishop Rowan Williams giving a keynote address at a plenary session on Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism. The gist of what he said can be summarised by this quote from his concluding paragraph:

The question of Christian identity in a world of plural perspectives and convictions cannot be answered in clichés about the tolerant co-existence of different opinions. It is rather that the nature of our conviction as Christians puts us irrevocably in a certain place, which is both promising and deeply risky, the place where we are called to show utter commitment to the

God who is revealed in Jesus and to all those to whom his invitation is addressed. Our very identity obliges us to active faithfulness of this double kind. We are not called to win competitions or arguments in favour of our 'product' in some religious marketplace. If we are, in the words of Olivier Clement, to take our dialogue beyond the encounter of ideologies, we have to be ready to witness, in life and word, to what is made possible by being in the place of Jesus the anointed – 'our reasons for living, for loving less badly and dying less badly'.

The mid-term of the WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence was celebrated at the Assembly, and a candlelight vigil for peace was held in the centre of the city.

The Assembly also received a document, *AGAPE: A call to love and action*, which was the result of work on economic globalisation since the Harare Assembly. The process had examined the project of economic globalisation that is led by the ideology of unfettered market forces and serves the dominant political and economic interests, and highlighted concerns about the growing inequality, the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few and the destruction of the earth. Over against that, in receiving the document the Assembly emphasised that a world without poverty is not only possible but is in keeping with the grace of God for the world.

It was the first Assembly since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and USA member churches of the WCC addressed a letter to the Assembly. In a lengthy letter of repentance, one paragraph read:

... we are citizens of a nation that has done much in these years to endanger the human family and to abuse the creation. Following the terrorist attacks, you sent 'living letters' inviting us into a deeper solidarity with those who suffer daily from violence around the world. But our country responded by seeking to reclaim a privileged and secure place in the world, raining down terror on the truly vulnerable among our global neighbours. Our leaders turned a deaf ear to the voices of church leaders throughout our nation and the world, entering into imperial projects that seek to dominate and control for the sake of our own national interests. Nations have been demonized and God has been enlisted in national agendas that are nothing short of idolatrous. We lament with special anguish the war in Iraq, launched in deception and violating global norms of justice and human rights. We mourn all who have died or been injured in this war; we acknowledge with shame abuses carried out in our name; we confess that we have failed to raise a prophetic voice loud enough and persistent enough to deter our leaders from this path of pre-emptive war. Lord have mercy.

Recognising a rapidly changing church and social context, and faced with declining income, the delegates agreed to focus future WCC work on a limited number of core issues – four areas of engagement: ① unity, spirituality and mission; ② ecumenical formation especially focusing on youth; ③ global justice; and ④ bringing a credible

voice and prophetic witness to the world. In regard to social justice, the Assembly affirmed that the WCC should expand its work on alternatives to economic globalisation, deepening the theological and analytical grounding of this work, and sharing “practical, positive approaches from the churches”.

### **THE TENTH ASSEMBLY: Busan, 2013**

The most recent Assembly was held in Busan, South Korea in 2013. It brought together some 3.000 participants from around the world – delegates from the 345 member churches, and representatives from non-member churches (esp. the RC Church) and ecumenical organisations. The theme around which the participants gathered was again a prayer, *God of Life, lead us to justice and peace*; and plenary sessions explored this theme under three focus topics: unity, mission, and justice and peace.

The Assembly reviewed the work of the WCC, using the report *Faith that does Justice: The Journey of the WCC from Porto Alegre to Busan*. Areas of ecumenical engagement and concerns outlined included: eco-justice, peacebuilding and advocacy, incorporating theological understandings, and promoting the ecumenical formation of youth. So, typical of Assemblies, it reviewed the programmatic activities of the WCC; made decisions and recommendations that set priorities for the future work of the WCC; issued public statements and recorded concern and urged action by the churches on a range of issues.

These included “Christian presence and witness in the Middle East”; the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo; the rights and protection of religious minorities; the human rights of stateless people; issues of migrants and refugees as a global problem that must now be addressed at an international level; and the commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 2015

Being held in the Republic of Korea, the Assembly brought churches closer to the realities of an unresolved conflict, and so enabled the churches to express solidarity with Korean people across South and North; and through a statement on *Peace and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula*, the Assembly called upon “all stakeholders in the region to participate in a creative process for building peace on the Korean peninsula by halting all military exercises on the Korean peninsula, by ceasing foreign intervention, withdrawing foreign troops and reducing military expenditures”.

The Assembly endorsed a Unity Statement, *God’s Gift and Call to Unity – and our Commitment*; and it received from the F&O Commission a new convergence document, *The Church: towards a Common Vision*.

From another commission, the CWME, there was another document to be received: *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*. This is a new WCC affirmation on mission and evangelism. Since the WCC Porto Alegre Assembly, the CWME had been working and contributing toward the construction of a new ecumenical mission affirmation that could be presented to the Busan Assembly. Since the integration of the International Missionary Council and the WCC in New Delhi, 1961, there had been only one official WCC position statement on mission and evangelism which was approved by the central committee in 1982, “Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation”. This new mission affirmation was unanimously approved by the WCC Central Committee held in 2012. It is the aim of this ecumenical discernment to seek vision, concepts and directions for a renewed understanding and practice of mission and evangelism in a changing world. Within the WCC, there is a great richness of traditions and of the churches’ practice of mission, and this is reflected in a document of this kind.

The original WCC Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 sent a message to the churches and the world that included the phrase, “We intend to stay together”. The message of the 2013 Assembly, with its title “join the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace”, affirms, “We intend to move together”. And it offered this affirmation:

We share our experience of the search for unity in Korea as a sign of hope in the world. This is not the only land where people live divided, in poverty and richness, happiness and violence, welfare and warfare. We are not allowed to close our eyes to harsh realities or to rest our hands from God’s transforming work. As a fellowship, the World Council of Churches stands in solidarity with the people and the churches in the Korean peninsula, and with all who strive for justice and peace.

### **Conference on World Mission and Evangelism – Arusha**

Since the Tenth Assembly, that has been another Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, which took place in Arusha, Tanzania, in 2018 under the theme ***Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship***.

“The conference understood mission as multivalent. That includes joyful witness to the person of Jesus Christ and his gospel; commitment to working for justice and reconciliation among all peoples; and participation in interfaith, secular, and ecumenical dialogue that seeks mutual understanding and common witness. It celebrated the unity of all peoples as it marvelled at their God-given diversity. It reflected on issues of missionary practice and sought new ways of being faithful to God’s mission with the leading of the Spirit.

“It was an ecumenical conference so those attending were an active representation of mainline Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and African Instituted churches. Efforts were made to engage delegates in an open, loving, and honest dialogue. As the Conference was in Africa for the first time since 1958, the spirit of African rhythms, music, and art pervaded.

“The conference sought to attend to the signs of the times that particularly affected African peoples and lands. It promoted the contribution of the African context to current understandings of mission, and to shaping mission theology and future practice”.

After the conference, the three task groups of the Commission worked on finalising a study document, which has been published as a single volume, *Called to Discipleship: Mission in the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*.

### **Towards the Eleventh Assembly**

Within the world-wide ecumenical movement, attention is now turned to the next Assembly of the WCC. The plans are for the eleventh Assembly to be held in Karlsruhe, Germany, in September 2022. It will bring to the churches a call for an ‘ecumenism of the heart’ in a broken world, inspired by the Assembly’s theme, “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity”.

See W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982, pp.63-69

Ibid., pp.70-85, 112-120

Engel, Frank, *Christians in Australia Volume 2: Times of Change 1918-1978*, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1993, pp.221-222

Those delegates were Jean Skuse and Dorothy McMahon. Jean was appointed to the WCC Central Committee, where she was elected one of the two Vice-Moderators. She also became General Secretary of the ACC at the beginning of 1976.

*Mission and Evangelism: an Ecumenical Affirmation*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983

At the time, Bishop Tutu was the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches (1978-1984) – ‘the hottest ecclesiastical seat in the country’.

W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches*, pp. 66-67

Ibid., pp.112-120

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*The Church: towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013

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# ECUMENICAL HISTORY



# **THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT**

**A HISTORY  
from 1948**