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## **The World Council of Churches: Time for Jubilee?**

**by Alan F. H. Wisdom**

Editor's note—This article was written just prior to the beginning of the WCC Assembly.

From December 3 through 14, some four thousand persons gathered in Harare, Zimbabwe for a rare occasion. This was only the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches since its establishment in 1948. And because 1998 was the fiftieth anniversary of the First Assembly in Amsterdam, the WCC declared this gathering to be a "Jubilee Assembly."

Under Old Testament law the Jubilee Year was an occasion to "proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (Lev 25:10). The fiftieth year was to be a time to restore right relationships to God, other persons, and the earth. In freeing slaves, forgiving debts, and restoring land to its original holders, the Hebrews were to remember that they and all their assets belonged exclusively and permanently to the Lord God. In the preaching of Jesus, the theme of Jubilee was linked to the call to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17).

It was not clear whether this was exactly the intention of the planners of the Jubilee Assembly. The plans for its Jubilee Assembly called for celebrating the council's first 50 years as a steady, albeit incomplete, pilgrimage toward Christian unity. At the same time, the WCC would consider alternative visions of its future course.

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"Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches," a policy statement approved by the WCC Central Committee, was to be discussed in Harare. The document, despite its title, lacked a single coherent vision of either the WCC's past or its future. Instead it pointed in confused fashion toward two very different notions of the next step in the ecumenical journey.

- (1) The WCC could move on to "a 'wider ecumenism' or 'macro-ecumenism' — an understanding which would open the ecumenical movement to other religious and cultural traditions beyond the Christian community" (p. 11). The council already "offers itself as a forum" for cooperation between Christian "communities or movements whose objectives and activities are in harmony with the basis, purpose, and functions of the WCC." These communities, in turn, are immersed in a "wider network of social or popular movements." The latter are "prophetic within and beyond the churches" (p. 23). A "macro-ecumenical" WCC would be absorbed more fully into that network of "popular" (i.e., leftist) movements. And its "prophetic" political activities would more often go "beyond the churches."

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- (2) The WCC could “search for new forms of relationships at all levels” with more conservative churches that have been absent or marginalized from the life of the council (p. 24). It could reach out to break down the barriers that have separated it from Roman Catholic, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches. It could seek a fuller inclusion and respect for the large Orthodox communions that have felt alienated from the WCC.

Either one of these approaches would involve turning away from some important aspects of the WCC’s heritage and history. The question is: Which aspects of that heritage and history would it be best for the WCC to leave behind now? This paper will attempt to make these kinds of distinctions, drawing on the WCC’s self-understandings from Amsterdam to the current “Common Understanding” statement and on the WCC’s record of action through those years. In closing, this paper will try to suggest how Presbyterians and others might encourage the WCC to choose the wiser course.

### **A Noble Vision**

The WCC was founded on a noble vision of Christian unity that is simultaneously evangelical, orthodox, and catholic. The council defined itself constitutionally as “a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

From the beginning, some objected that the WCC’s confessional foundations—beyond the phrase just quoted—were rather shallow. It was also evident that some within the WCC intended to use the council as a vehicle for delivering political pronouncements. But those early pronouncements were much more cautious and moderate than later ones, and they always subordinated their prudential political judgments to larger theological affirmations. Those affirmations—of the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, and the authority of the Scriptures—were eager and unrestrained. They still stand as a bulwark to which theologically orthodox WCC delegates can resort in today’s debates.

In many ways, the WCC was an outgrowth of the powerful evangelical missions movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Protestant missionaries strove to bring the Gospel into cultures where it had not yet been heard, they found that their denominational differences were sometimes obscuring their Christian witness. For these young missionaries, Christian unity was not an abstract end—a tidying up of theological discrepancies, a streamlining of ecclesiastical bureaucracies. It was rather a practical means to the fulfillment of Jesus’ Great Commission that had laid claim upon their lives.

The WCC’s founders knew that their unity could come only in Christ. They had seen — in a World War only just concluded—the deception and destruction wrought when human ideologies were substituted for the Gospel of

Christ, and human utopias for the hope of his kingdom. Although the early WCC was eager to study how Christians might act responsibly to meet society’s needs, it was clear that the best hope that the Church had to offer the world was Jesus Christ himself. Different aspects of the person and work of Christ provided the themes of all the WCC assemblies from 1948 through 1983.

The biblical verse that appears most frequently in WCC self-explanations is John 17:21—the prayer of Jesus for his followers “that they may all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Another favorite verse is Ephesians 1:9-10, which speaks of the Father’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.” Both of these passages root the council’s quest for Christian unity firmly in the eternal relationship of the Trinity, the ongoing mandate to make Christ known to the ends of the earth, and the future expectation of Christ’s glorious rule over all. In 1951 the WCC Central Committee stated that the word ecumenical “is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the gospel to the whole world.”

### **A New ‘Common Understanding and Vision’**

When these early declarations are compared to the more recent “Common Understanding and Vision” statement, the differences are subtle but powerful. A quite distinct set of interests and modes of thinking has slipped into the WCC’s institutional culture over these past fifty years.

The “Common Understanding” document is in many ways typical of contemporary statements of principle coming from left-leaning, but politically-prudent officers of historically orthodox Christian bodies. It is notable more for what it does not say than for what it does say. There are no open repudiations of central Christian doctrines here. There is not a single phrase in the whole document that would rouse conservatives to instant outrage. Yet there are a number of points at which the document maintains a telling silence—or at which it speaks so softly as to be almost inaudible:

**1. Our understanding and worship of God as Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.** There are only two brief references to the Trinity in the whole 24-page document. One was a quote from an early WCC document, for the sake of history. The other, evidently of more current composition, does state that WCC member churches “come together in this body on a Trinitarian theological basis.” But then the passage proceeds to name the Trinity as “God,” “Jesus Christ,” and “the Holy Spirit” (p. 20). Nowhere in the currently-composed sections of the document does one find the words “Father” or “Son.” This omission should be a major problem for Eastern Orthodox, or anyone else who believes that Christians should be careful to refer to God in the terms that he has given us in the Scriptures—especially the most precious names of the Trinity into which we are baptized.

**2. The centrality of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the world, and the only basis for the unity and mission of the Church.** Somehow the figure of Christ recedes in the “Common Understanding” document. To be sure, a word count would reveal dozens of mentions of “Jesus” or “Christ.” And there are one or two perfunctory bows toward the doctrine that “they [the churches] are related to one another thanks to actions of God in Jesus Christ which are prior to any decisions they may make” (p. 14). But basically this document is not about what Christ has done or what Christ commands us to do; it’s about what the churches decide to do together.

The crucial chapter on “The Self-Understanding of the World Council of Churches” begins with a reference to the WCC’s long-standing constitutional definition of itself as “a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” The rest of the chapter is devoted to explicating only two phrases from that definition: “fellowship of churches” and “common calling.” Needless to say, these are the two most “horizontally”-oriented phrases from the definition. The discussion of them is almost entirely about the human social dimension—within the Church, as Christians seek unity, and in the world, as Christians seek to serve others and point society toward greater peace and justice.

When the chapter comes to propose a fresh “articulation of the Council’s purposes and functions on the occasion of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary,” it begins by affirming “the essential identity of the WCC as a fellowship of churches which call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life, through witness and service to the world” (p. 18). The rest of the five-paragraph reformulation continues in the same vein, with many phrases about “the churches’ ‘organizational ties’ and ‘ecumenical initiatives,’” but not a single word about a transcendent God for whose sake the Church exists. “Faith” and “worship” are mentioned, but the object of faith and worship is never specified.

Almost entirely lost is the sense that Christ is the author of Christian unity, the one who made peace in his own body, and the one whose return holds our ultimate hope of justice in this world. In this document, Jesus appears mostly as a model and an inspiration for the WCC’s work of renewing the Church and world—not as the central actor in that work. One passage asserts that the ecumenical movement is “rooted in the life of Christian churches” (p. 11). An earlier generation would have supposed it to be rooted in the life of Christ himself (Colossians 2:7).

**3. Evangelism.** The word “evangelism” occurs a number of times in the “Common Understanding” document. But it never refers unequivocally to the proclamation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ with the intention that others might come to faith in him. There are several references to Christ’s prayer in John 17 that his followers “may all be one” (p. 4, 10, 13, 17). The document observes that the purpose of this unity is “so that the world may believe.” It never specifies, however, in

whom or what the world is supposed to believe. Each citation of the verse stops abruptly at the phrase “so that the world may believe. . .” omitting the crucial next phrase “. . . *that you [the Father] have sent me [the Son].*”

In a listing of the “common calling” of the churches in the WCC (pp. 16-17), a brief and vague reference to “offering common witness to Jesus Christ” is almost lost in the middle of many other objectives. For example: “maintaining fragile links of communication” between churches “on opposite sides of wars,” ministering to refugees, ending “historic bonds of dependence and dominance and forging new kinds of partnerships,” “defending in international forums the rights of those oppressed,” passing “judgment [on] every form of racism,” “challenging structures that reinforce sexism,” and “seeking to make their own [church] communities and the instruments of their fellowship together more fully inclusive of women, youth, persons with disabilities and all others threatened with exclusion.”

Although the document makes an effort to keep some balance between the “social” and “ecclesial” dimensions of ecumenism, it shows no balance between evangelism and social transformation. Even the “ecclesial” work seems really to be a form of social action—it is trying to make the churches conform to the vision of justice that the WCC hopes will eventually take hold in the world.

It is quite striking that in an enumeration of “facets of the ecumenical vocation which have taken on a higher profile in recent years” (p. 18), none of these has anything to do with bringing more persons or people groups to faith in Christ. The three “facets” mentioned as being especially on the cutting edge of ecumenism are “concerns for upholding the integrity of creation, relating to people of other faiths and promoting processes of education which enable Christians to think and act ecumenically.” Another passage makes clear, incidentally, that “relating to people of other faiths” means “dialogue and cooperation with people of other faiths in order to build viable human communities” (p. 24). Proselytism—a dirty word in the WCC vocabulary—is not encouraged.

**4. Self-criticism and repentance.** In looking back over its own record over the past 50 years, the WCC takes a mostly bright view. The “Common Understanding” statement hails the “profound ecumenical engagement and commitment to the WCC among member churches and partners” (p. 4). It boasts of how “even in the darkest moments of the Cold War, WCC member churches and courageous women and men within them have built bridges across ideological divides” (p. 6).

The “Common Understanding” statement briefly expresses some regret that the climate for ecumenism is less favorable today. “There are signs of a weakening of ecumenical commitment, of a growing distance between the WCC and its member churches, and of a widespread perception among the young generation that the ecumenical movement has lost its vitality and does not provide relevant answers to the pressing problems of today,” the statement says (p. 5). “Many churches and

Christian communities, including some whose witness is vital and whose growth is rapid, have remained outside the fellowship of formal ecumenical bodies," it adds (p. 7). The document also mentions declining financial support of the WCC and the threat of schism in some member churches.

But it must be remarked that these criticisms are directed mostly toward developments in some WCC member denominations – not toward trends in the WCC as an institution itself. The following sentence is the closest the document comes to admitting error on the part of the council itself: "Nor has the World Council of Churches in its struggles for justice and human rights been able to act and speak according to the same criteria everywhere" (p. 7).

The most likely topic for WCC confession of sin, the frequent lack of visible solidarity with those persecuted under the former Soviet bloc, is not touched at all in the statement. WCC General Secretary Konrad Raiser has repeatedly rejected calls for the council to review its record during the Cold War, maintaining that this is a matter better left to historians (Religion News Service, Nov. 17, 1997). Far less are the WCC leaders inclined to admit that they have drifted from the council's basic purposes. Thus the first phrase of the Eighth Assembly theme ("Turn to God – Rejoice in Hope") seems to be directed more at the world, and perhaps WCC member churches, than at the council itself. Repentance does not appear to be high on the WCC's agenda for itself at the "Jubilee Assembly."

### **Diverted into Political Crusades**

Nevertheless, some kind of decisive turn appears inevitable for the World Council. The WCC's record of action in recent decades does not square with its founding ideal of Christ-based and Christ-centered unity. The council will have to choose between a reaffirmation of that ideal or a continued pursuit of its more recent directions.

Not only has the WCC lost theological substance and vigor (as illustrated in the attenuated language about the Trinity, salvation in Jesus Christ, and evangelism in the "Common Understanding" document). It has also invested its authority and energy in social crusades that are only ambiguously related to the WCC's original purposes. The vacuum created as theological convictions become more diffuse has been filled with a more specific political agenda. At best this agenda represents a tangent from the ecumenical enterprise of demonstrating unity in Christ so that the world might believe in him. At worst it represents an obstacle and even a contradiction to that enterprise.

The problem is summed up in a slogan that became popular in WCC circles during the late 1960s: "Let the world set the agenda for the Church." The slogan affirmed God's saving work in all history and all the world, even where the Church was not present. It encouraged the Church to discern God's providence in contemporary secular movements of human liberation, and to make itself a servant of those movements. This slogan de-emphasized

the special revelation of Jesus Christ that has been entrusted to the Church. It bypassed the role of the Scriptures, as the authoritative witness to Christ, in setting the agenda for his body. It denied the spiritual poverty of a world that does not know the person of Christ. And it equated secular processes of liberation with the promise of eternal life in Christ.

In practice, the mindset encapsulated in this slogan has yielded a revolution in the WCC's approach to Christian mission. The new approach, applied to a range of issues, works roughly as follows: (1) WCC and other church officials see a great evil in the world. (2) They identify a victim group (preferably non-Western and non-Christian) that is suffering the evil, and an oppressor group (preferably Western and Christian) that can be blamed for the evil. (3) They declare that overcoming this evil must become an urgent priority for the Church, taking precedence even over its traditional theology and mission. (4) They listen favorably to spokespersons for the victim group (often non-Christians or non-representative Christians who have anointed themselves as leaders of "liberation movements"). They discount the testimony of all (even fellow Christians) who can be identified with the oppressor group. (5) Following the counsel of such spokespersons, they insist that the Church must repent of its complicity in the evil, overhauling its theology and recasting its mission in order to put the Church effectively on the side of the victim group. (6) The final result is churches that are no longer centered around their traditional confessions of Christ. Unity now comes instead from the political agenda that has been set by the world.

Consider the range of issues to which the WCC has applied this method over the course of three decades:

### **Threats to World Peace**

From its earliest days, the WCC has operated on the assumption that modern warfare conducted by nuclear-capable states is the worst of all possible evils. The 1948 Amsterdam Assembly proclaimed: "War as a method of settling disputes is incompatible with the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ. The part which war plays in our present international life is a sin against God and a degradation of man" (Quoted in *Overcome Violence: A Programme of the World Council of Churches* [Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997], p. 11). This statement drew no moral distinctions between aggressors and their victims.

Furthermore, the council has spoken as if the possession of modern weapons—especially nuclear weapons—is almost equally blameworthy with the use of such weapons. "We believe that the time has come when the churches must unequivocally declare that the production and deployment as well as the use of nuclear weapons are a crime against humanity," concluded a 1981 WCC meeting on disarmament (*Overcome Violence*, p. 17). The 1983 Vancouver Assembly urged churches to "emphasize their willingness to live without the protection of armaments" (Ibid).

This moral fixation on the possession of weapons, rather than the purposes for which their use might be contemplated, led the WCC inevitably to treat the Western democracies and the Soviet bloc as morally equivalent actors. Since both sides were equally well-armed, both sides were equally condemned for their alleged militarism. Parallel denunciations of capitalism and communism were also a staple of WCC rhetoric. The thinking seemed to be that any sign of preference for one system over the other could be perceived as a justification for warfare.

In specific situations, though, the WCC was far more likely to criticize the democratic West than the Soviet Union. It has issued a long series of harsh judgments against every significant U.S. military involvement over the past three decades: Indochina in the 1960s and 1970s, Central America and Grenada in the 1980s, and the Persian Gulf in the 1990s.

Over the same period, the WCC was decidedly cautious in confronting Soviet military adventures. The 1983 Vancouver Assembly called only for the “withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in the context of an overall political settlement, including agreement between Afghanistan [the Soviet-installed regime] and the USSR.” It also urged “an end to the supply of arms to the opposition groups from outside [by the United States]” (Ernest W. Lefever, *Nairobi to Vancouver*, [Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1987], p. 91). By contrast, in Vietnam and Central America the WCC had no hesitation in demanding an unconditional, unilateral American pullback. It took little notice of Soviet support for aggressive regimes in North Vietnam and Nicaragua, beyond vague requests that “all parties” should “stop military actions” (Ernest W. Lefever, *Amsterdam to Nairobi* [Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1979] p. 29).

The WCC gave starkly unequal treatment to abuses under U.S. and Soviet client states. Its criticisms of the South Korean military regime of the 1970s and 1980s were far more severe than any charges that it has ever leveled against the Stalinist dictatorship in North Korea. The 1983 Vancouver Assembly alleged that the democratically-elected government of El Salvador “has demonstrated an inability to curb human rights violations and implement needed reforms.” It depicted the Marxist guerrillas seeking to overthrow the Salvadoran government as “the forces of historic change” that were being unjustly resisted. The same assembly praised at length the “life-affirming achievements of the Nicaraguan people and its [Sandinista] leadership since 1979” (Lefever, *Nairobi to Vancouver*, p. 94). A 1983 WCC delegation to Nicaragua asserted: “Though we are supporters of a free press, we can understand some of the particularities of Nicaragua that argue for the present press censorship” (J.A. Emerson Vermaat, *The World Council of Churches & Politics, 1975-1986* [New York: Freedom House, 1989], p. 56).

WCC officials had their explanations for this double standard. They asserted that they had a duty to listen to those victimized in the Cold War conflicts. In the West, the council’s favored voices of the victimized were the

leftist peace and disarmament movements. These took advantage of the freedom available in their countries to launch stinging rebukes of their own democratic governments. The WCC, consequently, felt free to follow suit.

On the other hand, in the Soviet bloc the WCC’s preferred interlocutors were groups under the control or intimidation of the communist regimes. These included well-known Soviet front groups such as the World Peace Council and the Christian Peace Conference, in which top WCC officials were actively involved and which joined with the WCC in co-sponsoring several events (Vermaat, pp. 6-7).

WCC leaders insisted that they had to take their cues especially from the Russian Orthodox and other Eastern church leaders who were permitted to have contact with the council. Held on a tight leash of government restrictions, aware that their delegations were subject to surveillance and infiltration by state security agencies, these Eastern church representatives were hardly free to speak their minds. Indeed, they were under pressure to advance the propaganda aims of their own governments.

Documentation from KGB archives opened since the fall of the Soviet Union shows that many members of the Russian Orthodox clergy, including important hierarchs, were regarded by Soviet authorities as agents of the KGB. Reports to the KGB on WCC meetings indicated satisfaction with the results that had been obtained (“What’s the Truth about the WCC and the KGB?” *Religion and Democracy*, December, 1992). Those results included the brushing aside of appeals from Soviet Christian dissidents at the 1975 Nairobi Assembly as well as the 1983 Vancouver Assembly.

This skewed WCC approach to war/peace issues is not merely an historical relic. It has continued for a decade now since the end of the Cold War. The hostility to the West and its possession and use of military force remain unaltered. The 1991 Canberra Assembly, meeting in the midst of the Persian Gulf War, called for an immediate cease-fire—without any requirement that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait. The Western use of military force to liberate Kuwait was denounced much more strongly than the original Iraqi invasion of the emirate.

A January 1998 WCC delegation to Iraq spoke out against both the current UN economic sanctions as well as a possible U.S. military strike against Iraq. The delegation declared that any military action against Iraqi “would only intensify the sufferings of the powerless Iraqi people.” The group also concluded that sanctions against Iraq “seriously violate the human rights of large sectors of the Iraqi population.” The WCC delegation did not suggest any alternative means of forcing the Saddam Hussein regime to comply with UN efforts to halt the proliferation of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons (“Don’t Single Out Iraq Over Weapons Issue, Churches Tell US,” *Ecumenical News International*, Feb. 18, 1998).

These kinds of statements raise the question of whether the WCC has become, for all practical purposes, pacifist. The

only exception to that trend has been the eagerness of the council, for the past three decades, to show solidarity with some violent Third World revolutionary movements (see below, p.7). But it does not seem probable that Western powers could ever satisfy the WCC that they had sufficient justification for a major deployment of military force.

## Global Poverty

For several decades, the WCC has seen the world's poor as victims of "economic domination and unjust social structures" (in the words of the Vancouver Assembly, Lefever, *Nairobi to Vancouver*, p. 56). The council has expressed growing frustration that a large portion of the planet's population continues to be mired in severe poverty. In searching for an explanation, the WCC has turned to leftist movements that claim to speak in the name of the poor. From those movements the WCC has learned to lay the blame for poverty at the door of capitalism.

This is the analysis of the international economic situation adopted by the 1975 Nairobi Assembly:

"(a) The present international economic structures are dominated by a few rich countries who control a large proportion of the world's resources and markets.

"(b) Transnational corporations, often in league with oppressive regimes, distort and exploit the economies of poor nations.

"(c) National economies are controlled in many cases by a small group of elites who also often give special access to transnational corporations.

"(d) Patterns of land ownership are often exploitative." (Lefever, *Amsterdam to Nairobi*, p. 73)

The WCC's solution to this situation would be a redistribution of wealth within and among nations. This kind of redistribution would also entail a concentration of economic power in the hands of the state. Such was the shape of the New International Economic Order proposals about which the WCC was so enthusiastic in the 1970s. A 1977 WCC report spoke hazily of a "structural rethinking" of "ownership, control and allocation of natural resources and economic surplus" and "control over the creation, communication and application of knowledge and technology." WCC economic adviser Jan Pronk described the proposals more succinctly as "international democratic socialism" (Lefever, *Nairobi to Vancouver*, p. 59).

With the fall of the Soviet bloc and the economic stagnation of the Western European welfare states, socialism has been widely discredited. WCC leaders are accordingly less inclined to name "socialism" as their economic objective. Nevertheless, their hostility to capitalism, free trade, and transnational corporations persists. One idea that has been floating around WCC circles over the past decade has been that economic justice should be declared a confessional issue—that is, "one on which a person's position determines whether or not he or she stands within the fellowship of the church." A 1987 WCC consultation on this question concluded that "economic-scientific analyses demonstrate that the

capitalist system" is "the root cause" of the "reality of poverty, powerlessness, and death imposed on the majority of the world's people." The consultation insisted that it should be a "fundamental requirement" of Christian faith to "reject and resist" the current international economic system (Lefever, *Nairobi to Vancouver*, p. 61). So far the council has not decreed any excommunications of capitalist heretics. It would be an irony, however, if a body that finds it difficult to draw any theological lines around the Christian faith would instead draw the lines on the basis of political belief.

Going into the Harare Assembly, the WCC leadership appears driven by these same ideological instincts. Its featured political proposal is to be "an appeal in the spirit of the biblical jubilee to end the stranglehold of international debt on impoverished people" (from a WCC press briefing dated October 1998). This proposal, like previous WCC pronouncements on international economics, treats the world's poor primarily as victims. Their plight is blamed upon the Western governments and financial institutions which lent money to developing countries in the past. The solution, which the WCC has borrowed from a leftist network called the "Jubilee 2000 Coalition," is quite simple: Cancel all the debts.

## Racial Injustice

The WCC took an early and courageous stand for racial equality. "It is here that the Church has failed most lamentably," the 1948 Amsterdam Assembly confessed, "where it has reflected and then by its example sanctified the racial prejudice that is rampant in the world. And yet it is here that today its guidance concerning what God wills for it is especially clear. It knows that it must call society away from prejudice based upon race or color and from the practices of discrimination and segregation as denials of justice and human dignity" (Lefever, *Amsterdam to Nairobi*, p. 68).

As the council reflected on the intensifying racial struggles of the 1960s, it came to the conclusion that more would be required of it than a merely verbal repudiation of racism. It would have to take the side of peoples victimized by racism. Even more, it would have to lend active support to secular organizations that purported to represent those peoples. The WCC was particularly attracted to more radical "liberation movements" that identified the wealthy Western nations and the capitalist system as the seedbeds of racism. Such movements looked toward a socialist revolution as the definitive means to uproot white racism.

A 1969 WCC consultation concluded that: "all else failing the Church and the churches [should] support resistance movements, including revolutions, which are aimed at the elimination of political or economic tyranny which makes racism possible" (Notting Hill Consultation, as cited in *Overcome Violence*, p. 15). Later that same year, the WCC Central Committee authorized a Special Fund to Combat Racism, which would make grants to "organizations of oppressed racial groups or organizations supporting victims of racial injustice whose purposes are

not inconsonant with the general purposes of the World Council” (Lefever, *Amsterdam to Nairobi*, p. 98).

Through the 1970s and 1980s, the Special Fund disbursed over \$8 million in such grants. Almost half of this total went to Southern African guerrillas groups such as the African National Congress, the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO), and the Patriotic Front of Zimbabwe (Lefever, *Nairobi to Vancouver*, pp. 120-121). At the time these groups were all either officially Marxist-Leninist or heavily influenced by communist elements, and all received support from the Soviet bloc.

The criteria for the Special Fund asserted that “the grants are to be made and used for humanitarian activities.” But they also stated that “the grants are made without control over the manner in which they are spent” (Lefever, *Amsterdam to Nairobi*, p. 88). Thus there was no assurance that the money could not be applied to military purposes—a not unlikely prospect, given that the largest recipients had committed themselves to “armed struggle” as their principal strategy.

By the time SWAPO and the African National Congress took power, in Namibia and South Africa respectively, the world geopolitical situation had changed drastically. Both movements have so far been much more moderate in their exercise of power than their ideological antecedents would have predicted. World Council officials cite this development as a vindication.

Meanwhile, the WCC has continued to use the struggle against racism as a pretext for further selective attacks on the Western democracies. In 1994 the WCC, in cooperation with the U.S. National Council of Churches, sponsored a commission of “eminent persons” to investigate racism as a violation of human rights in the United States. The commission held hearings at several locations around the United States, at which representatives from radical groups claiming to represent ethnic minorities rehearsed a long list of grievances.

Then at the United Nations the next year, the WCC delivered a report lumping all those grievances together and coming to the conclusion that the U.S. stood guilty of “gross and persistent patterns of racism.” As examples of this racist violation of human rights, the council cited the publication of the book *The Bell Curve*, the passage of Proposition 187 (limiting government services to illegal immigrants in California), and the Republican victory in the 1994 congressional elections.

This WCC report then formed the basis of a resolution on “Violation of Human Rights in the United States as a Result of Racism,” which was introduced in the UN Human Rights Commission by Cuba. The resolution failed, garnering support only from Sudan and China. The WCC did not file any human rights complaints against Cuba, Sudan, or China, evidently judging the United States to be a worse offender (Paul Marshall, “WCC Racism Stand Gives New Ammunition to Rights Abusers,” *News Network International*, April 7, 1995).

## Sex Discrimination

The WCC evinced an early concern for opening opportunities to women, with a report to the 1948 Amsterdam Assembly on “The Life and Work of Women in the Church.” Over the course of the 1970s, the council came to a decision to engage sexism in church and culture in the same manner in which it had confronted racism. The 1975 Nairobi Assembly report on “Structures of Injustice and Struggles for Liberation” addressed racism and sexism in parallel sections.

But the WCC campaign for women’s liberation did not acquire institutional momentum until the council’s Central Committee declared 1988-98 to be an “Ecumenical Decade—Churches in Solidarity with Women.” This approach to women’s issues soon followed the ideological habits established in earlier ecumenical crusades. Women were identified largely as a victim group. Women’s voices were heard mostly through radical feminists who attributed their oppression to central features of Western cultures and economies. The solution, it seemed, was revolutionary change in society—and perhaps in the Church’s own doctrines.

Local churches were first introduced to the Ecumenical Decade through a study entitled *Into Action: A Resource for Participation in the Ecumenical Decade*. The opening essay dismissed the traditional roles of women as obsolete. It accused the churches of holding women captive in those roles: “Many churches endorse only one lifestyle for women: the full-time wife and mother. By wrapping this lifestyle in Bible verses it is presented as the only truly spiritual way of living for women” (Faye Short, “The Ecumenical Decade—Churches in Solidarity with Women,” in *Proclaim Liberty: A Jubilee Appeal*, by the Association for Church Renewal, 1998, p. 36). Amidst valid expressions of concern about the sufferings of women, the study offered an odd mixture of orthodox and unorthodox responses.

A 1992 WCC mission study, *We Belong Together: Churches in Solidarity with Women*, departed much more sharply from the Christian tradition. All the authors in a section entitled “Rethinking the Tradition: The Bible and the Church” posited the need to purge the Scriptures of malign patriarchal influences. One author singled out Proverbs 31 (the encomium to the virtuous wife) as “one of the most oppressive passages for women found in the Hebrew canon.” Another charged that “men have defined Jesus Christ so as to undergird their own privileged positions in the church and society.” The same author insisted, “Because the redemptive process itself still continues, we cannot limit the experience of the Christ to the historical Jesus, but we must be open for redemption in contemporary times through new means” (Short, p. 37).

The 1993 “Re-Imagining” Conference arose out of this background. It was not officially sponsored or funded by the WCC; however, it was billed as a North American observance of the Ecumenical Decade. The North American women who staged the conference billed it as an observance of the mid-point of the Ecumenical Decade.

Several of the most prominent and controversial speakers, such as the radical Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung, had strong World Council connections. Mary Ann Lundy, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) official who played a major role in birthing Re-Imagining and subsequently lost her PCUSA position, moved on quickly to an appointment as WCC deputy general secretary. After the controversy over Re-Imagining exploded in 1994, WCC General Secretary Raiser came to the defense of the conference. He termed it one of “the most ecumenical meetings held in this country in a long while.” “Raiser added that he found ‘nothing outrageous’ in the ‘provocative formulations’ of Re-Imagining speakers” (“Lundy Nominated to WCC Position,” *The Presbyterian Layman*, Nov/Dec 1994, p.4).

Thus the extreme theological and liturgical experimentation of Re-Imagining—the worship of God as “Sophia” in preference to the names of the Trinity, the substitution of an eroticized milk-and-honey ceremony for the Eucharist, the denigration of Christ’s authority and atonement, the commendation of pagan deities and practices, and the rejection of traditional Christian sexual morality and the exaltation of lesbianism—do have some relationship to the WCC. They throw light upon the spiritual currents that were released by its Ecumenical Decade and found a place within it.

Those same currents were palpable as the council sent a large delegation to the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing. The WCC and related groups sponsored a number of seminars in the Non-Governmental Organizations Forum associated with the Beijing Conference. In a WCC seminar on “Gospel, Cultures, and Women,” one presenter denounced traditional Christianity as imperialistic, patriarchal, colonialist, capitalistic, egocentric, racist, and homophobic. “The Christianity we receive in Asia and other Third World countries,” she said, “is a religion so corrupted I call it religious fundamentalism. I call it Coca Cola Christianity because it came with the rise of capitalism in the U.S.A.” The presenter advised her audience: “I want us all to remember . . . we are the transformer, maker, and creator of our own religious and cultural tradition” (“Church Delegates Join Attack on Faith,” *Faith & Freedom*, Winter 1995-96, p. 8).

The WCC’s own Ecumenical News International (ENI) reported on another WCC seminar under the headline “Christian Tradition Perpetuates Violence Against Women.” The ENI story featured remarks by Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) staffer Rebecca Peters, who blamed “messages from the Bible, from church tradition and authorities” for “domestic violence, incest, child abuse and sexual exploitation of girls and women by clergy.” Peters suggested that “any element of Christian tradition that denies the full humanity of women. . . must be discarded, ignored, or transformed” (Sept. 6, 1995).

A report on WCC visits to churches during the Ecumenical Decade, entitled *Living Letters* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), contains many of the same attacks on Christian tradition—albeit usually in milder language. “Women in particular are often aware,” according to the report, “that the Bible is used to hold them down, to justify

male domination, to prevent them from participating, to make them feel guilty if they do not comply, to make them accept sacrifice and suffering. ‘The Bible is the problem!’ many women told us.” *Living Letters* makes no attempt to defend the Scriptures against this charge. It speaks instead of the need for women to “reread scripture through their own eyes,” so as to “choose what is life- and community-building in the Bible” (p. 38). *Living Letters* praises radical feminist movements such as “Women Church” which have separated themselves from traditional churches and attempted to form a religious community centered around women. “Such alternative movements are signs of hope,” according to the WCC report (p.18).

## Environmental Degradation

In recent years the WCC has steadily raised the profile of environmental concern in its vision of a rightly-ordered society. In the late 1970s the WCC began to speak of pursuing a “just, participatory, and sustainable society.” The use of the word “sustainable” implied a critique of lifestyles in the wealthier nations that were said to be consuming the earth’s resources too rapidly. WCC conferences of that era called for a “new lifestyle” involving reduced standards of living in the West.

In the past decade, the council’s favored phrase has shifted to “Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation” (JPIC). This new slogan contains the implicit accusation that human economic development is violating “the integrity of creation.” It also signals a new level of theological exploration of the notion of creation. A fair amount of this exploration has drawn helpful insights from biblical teachings: the goodness of God’s creation, the roles of the persons of the Trinity in creation, the value of every species and individual in the eyes of the Creator, the responsibilities of humans to care for the earth, and the sad consequences of human sin for the whole creation.

Nevertheless, other WCC-initiated excursions into creation theology have been less orthodox. They have used environmental concern as a pretext for departing from the biblical teaching. Many WCC-affiliated theologians and church officials have accepted the radical environmentalist critique that holds Christianity to be the guilty party in the rape of the earth. They deny the transcendence and sovereignty of God, believing that these doctrines introduce alienation between God, humans, and other creatures. They reject as “arrogant” any assertion that humans hold a special position as bearers of God’s image and stewards of his creation. They commend animist religions that worship the earth and other created things, as being “closer to nature” and more respectful of it.

This enviro-theological focus peaked at the 1991 Canberra Assembly, whose theme was “Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation.” One of the two keynote addresses by Parthenios, Oriental Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria, was thoroughly Trinitarian and traditional. The other, by radical Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung, who was also a 1993 Re-Imagining speaker, was quite the opposite.

According to an official WCC account, Chung entered the assembly hall “accompanied by sixteen Korean and two Aboriginal dancers, complete with gongs, bells, drums, clap sticks and candles. The address itself began with an invocation of the spirits of an eclectic collection of martyrs, from Hagar to the students in Tiananmen Square, from ‘the spirit of Earth, Air and Water’ to ‘our brother Jesus, tortured and killed on the cross.’ After setting fire to this list and letting the ashes drift to the ceiling, Prof. Chung spoke of Korea as a land of ‘spirits full of *Han* [bitterness, anger, grief]” (“A Personal Overview and Introduction,” *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly*, ed. Michael Kinnamon [Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991], p. 15).

These wandering spirits, Chung said, “have been agents through whom the Holy Spirit has spoken her compassion and wisdom for life. . . .For us they are the icons of the Holy Spirit who became tangible and visible to us.” Chung also mentioned Ina, a Filipino earth goddess, and Kwan In, an East Asian goddess of compassion and wisdom, as helpful images of the Holy Spirit.

This featured WCC speaker ridiculed the notion of an omnipotent God “who rescues all good guys and punishes all bad guys.” She dismissed as false any kind of dualism between God and the world. She preferred instead the Taoist conception of *ki*, the life force that permeates the universe. She called for a new theology that would be “life-centric” rather than “anthropocentric.” “This must be the time we have to reread the Bible from the perspective of birds, water, air, trees, and mountains, the most wretched of the earth in our time,” Chung proclaimed. “Learning to think like a mountain, changing our center from human beings to all living beings, has become our ‘responsibility’ in order to survive.” (Chung Hyun Kyung, “Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation,” *Signs of the Spirit*, pp. 39-46. Chung has more recently received nearly hagiographic treatment in a WCC film entitled “Gentle But Radical”).

In the debates at Canberra, the most egregious theological adventurism in the proposed reports on the environment was curbed. Subsequently, the WCC’s environmental activism has been directed more toward political issues. In the period leading up to the 1997 UN Climate Summit in Kyoto, WCC staffers worked with diplomats from small island nations to push for the most severe cuts in “greenhouse gas” emissions. They advocated a 20 percent reduction by 2005 (speech by Jennifer Morgan, coordinator of U.S. Climate Action Network, at Presbyterian Church (USA) “Witness in Washington” conference, Oct. 13, 1997).

As it became clear that the summit would settle for more modest goals, the top WCC official covering the issue lashed out at the Western nations. “The greed of certain rich industries and countries that are heavily dependent on fossil fuels risks destroying any chance for an effective treaty,” charged David G. Hallman, the WCC’s Climate Change Program Coordinator (“Greed Threatens Climate Negotiations, Claims Church Official,” WCC press release, Nov. 26, 1997). Hallman did not recognize any reason

other than “greed,” for opposition to the 20 percent reduction.

## Threats to Indigenous Cultures

As is observed above, environmental concerns have been closely linked to another WCC political crusade: the defense of indigenous cultures against Western influences. “Aboriginal spirituality” was given prominence at several points in the 1991 Canberra Assembly. One aboriginal theologian told the WCC delegates: “Only through our spiritual connection to the earth can we [the aborigines] continue in our own identity. This is why Aboriginal people conceive of themselves in terms of the land. In our view the earth is sacred. It is a living entity in which other living entities have origin and destiny. It is where our identity comes from, where our spirituality begins, where the Dreaming comes from; it is where stewardship begins. Aboriginal people are bound to the earth in their spirit. By means of our involvement in the natural world we ensure our own well-being.”

Some in the audience shouted, “Paganism!” and “Idolatry!” But the WCC Assembly planners apparently felt that they had struck a blow for justice (Lawrence E. Adams, “The WCC at Canberra: Which Spirit?” *First Things*, June/July 1991, pp. 32-33). One observer paraphrased the pre-Assembly papers as regretting “not only that much evil was done to aboriginal people [by European settlers], but that their very spirituality was violated by the introduction of Christianity in Australia” (Adams, p. 32).

WCC officials did not attempt to separate the precious Gospel of Christ from the flawed vessel of Western culture in which it had been conveyed. The spread of both was lamented equally. Nor did the WCC planners distinguish aboriginal Christians, who had infused their culture with the hope of Christ, from aborigines still practicing animist rites.

A mid-1990s WCC film entitled “Diverse Cultures, One Gospel” seems to take a similar view of pagan Filipino practices. The film gives a glowing portrayal of a “people’s mass,” in which Filipino villagers hear a “political and economic message” to inspire their “struggle for liberation” against Taiwanese developers. In one scene, the villagers also sacrifice a pig. The tribal priestess then examines the pig’s entrails to determine the will of deceased ancestors.

As if anticipating objections to this odd religious mixture, the narrator asks provocatively, “Can we speak of a pure Gospel?” A Russian priest later supplies the answer: “People who insist on a pure Gospel have hang-ups. But others are prepared for unity.” (Mark Tooley, “World Council of Churches: More World than Church?” *Faith & Freedom*, Summer 1996, p. 8).

This same pattern of reasoning recurs at various points in WCC programs and statements. Non-Western and non-Christian peoples are regarded as victims of the West—

not only because they are generally poor while the West is wealthy, not only because they are presumed to suffer the ravages of white racism, not only because their lives are threatened by Western weapons and their land is despoiled by Western-driven economic development, but also because they hold to religions that are being challenged by Christian evangelism.

In this WCC mindset, the pre-Christian and non-Christian religions are idealized as the sole genuine expressions of indigenous non-Western cultures. Christianity, on the other hand, is associated with a corrupt, avaricious, militaristic Western culture. All signs of the advance of that culture are to be deplored. Successful Christian proselytism is not a cause for celebration over the enlargement of the Church, but rather for concern over the encroachment on indigenous culture.

The WCC has tended therefore to look sympathetically upon non-Western governments and movements that claim to be defending their indigenous cultures. Even when that defense has involved persecution of Christian minorities and other human rights violations, the council has not objected loudly. It has preferred to pursue a cordial “inter-religious dialogue” with the persecutors, rather than confronting them with a strong stand for the religious liberties that they deny.

Perhaps the most severe religious persecution in the world today occurs in Sudan. A Muslim extremist government has waged a “holy war” for most of the past three decades to impose Islamic law upon the mostly Christian population of southern Sudan. Regarding Christian faith as a foreign import dividing the nation, the Khartoum government has employed a combination of economic incentives and brute force to induce conversions to Islam. More than 1.5 million have died in the conflict, mostly as a result of genocidal food blockades inflicted on the South. The government remains contemptuous of UN and Western human rights advocates who have reported its atrocities.

Yet, despite the cries of Sudanese Christians, the WCC has taken little public notice of their plight. Instead the council has participated in a series of Christian-Muslim dialogues, at which the Muslim side has included representatives of the Sudanese government and other intolerant Islamist regimes. One conference in 1994 was held in Khartoum itself. The keynote address was delivered by Hassan Al Turabi, the head of the ruling National Islamic Front of Sudan. The final communiqué from this conference declared that all participants shared a respect for “religious liberty.” It summoned Christians and Muslims together to offer an “alternative vision to the materialist, secularist view which dominates western society” (Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997), pp. 175-177).

The communiqué gave no indication that WCC or other Christian representatives challenged the Sudanese government on its human rights record. Looking toward further Christian-Muslim dialogues, Tarek Mitri of the WCC Office on Interreligious Relations explained that the

two sides would not meet as “two blocs facing each other, but people with similar questions involved in discussion” (Religion News Service, Dec. 21, 1995). The WCC evidently fears that any charges of religious persecution directed against Muslim regimes might imply an arrogant assumption of the superiority of Christianity and Western human rights standards.

A second major instance of religious persecution today is the People’s Republic of China. The communist regime in Beijing insists that Chinese Christians must belong only to churches affiliated with the Protestant China Christian Council or the Catholic Patriotic Association. These movements are subject to monitoring and regulation by Communist Party and state agencies. Among other prohibitions limiting the churches, they are forbidden to offer religious instruction to children. Christians who refuse to submit to the state-sanctioned organizations, or who disobey the regulations, are subject to harassment, interrogation, closure of their churches, and sentencing to *laogai* (reform through labor) camps. The government justifies these restrictions on the grounds that it must separate Chinese Christians from “foreign influences” and ensure that they are appropriately “patriotic.”

Over the years, the WCC has had remarkably little to say about human rights in the world’s most populous nation. While protesting strongly against the arrests of church leaders and other dissidents in Taiwan in earlier years, it has scarcely mentioned the far more repressive measures taken on the mainland. The WCC did take note of the brutality of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, but only years after the fact – when the Chinese government itself was acknowledging that “excesses” had occurred (Lefever, *Nairobi to Vancouver*, pp. 47-48).

For the most part the WCC has confined itself to transmitting the perspective of the China Christian Council. The Chinese council almost invariably echoes the propaganda line of the Beijing government: that there is no systematic religious persecution in China today, that Chinese Christians all support the communist regime and are grateful for its accomplishments, that they reject Bible smuggling and human rights criticism and other forms of “foreign interference,” that underground “house churches” are rare and unrepresentative and heretical, that the only Christians imprisoned in China are those who have committed crimes, and that things are getting better in China day by day in every way.

WCC General Secretary Konrad Raiser was circumspect in remarks on China at a 1996 WCC meeting. “I am not aware of any generalized persecution of Christians in China,” Raiser said, although he conceded vaguely that “there are severe limitations.” He attributed those limitations more to over-zealous local officials rather than national leaders. In cases where persons had been arrested for smuggling Bibles, Raiser faulted the smugglers more than those who were repressing them. He rebuked the smugglers for “conscious violation of existing regulations” and charged that their imprisonment had been “blown up as evidence of persecution” (Tooley, “World Council of

Churches: More World than Church?" *Faith & Freedom*, Summer 1996, p. 9).

The WCC general secretary also attempted to soften the image of Islamist extremists who have persecuted Christian minorities. "The Western perception of Islamic fundamentalists is lacking in discrimination," claimed Raiser. The WCC's desire, he stated, is not to criticize militant Islam but to "understand" it (Ibid).

### **The Next Political Crusade?**

It now appears that the WCC, at the Harare Assembly, may be about to embark upon another political crusade. Top WCC officials now seem determined to promote the legitimization of homosexual behavior within the church and society. In doing so, they are following the lead of homosexual activists who have waged the same struggle in many Western denominations and legislatures over the past two decades. They are also following the pattern of moral reasoning that the WCC has developed in previous causes.

The initiative on this new issue came first from several liberal Western churches that decided to use Harare as an occasion to spread a good word about homosexuality. The U.S. United Church of Christ, the United Church of Canada, and several churches in the Netherlands have commissioned pro-gay activists to hold workshops in the *padare* (open forum) section of the assembly. One of the Canadian sexual missionaries, David Hallman, remains a WCC employee as he performs this service (Religion News Service, Sept. 23, 1998).

The WCC leadership entered the issue when Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe made public statements hostile to homosexuals. WCC officials hastened to express their concern to President Mugabe. They secured a memorandum of agreement with the Zimbabwean government promising that homosexuals would be free to attend the Assembly without fear of harassment or detention (Religion News Service, Sept. 23, 1998).

More recently, a WCC news story announced "a growing willingness by the WCC's leadership to face up to an issue [homosexuality] which the organization has generally regarded as too divisive for its member churches to allow a robust debate, and which is not on the official agenda for discussion at the Harare assembly." The report quoted General Secretary Raiser as declaring that the council could not "close its eyes" to the issue (Ecumenical News International, Sept. 21, 1998).

Raiser also gave transparent clues as to the direction he was leaning on the issue. Speaking at a Dutch symposium, he said he saw homosexuality as a situation in which "change occurred in society, and that obliged the churches to take another look." The WCC general secretary did not think that the interpretation of Scripture was the determinant factor. "Churches and their members should," he said, "be aware that their moral stance was 'cultural' and not rooted in scripture as they believe," according to the WCC's own account (Ibid).

Thus the approach to the issue seems to be taking shape. It is a shape familiar to observers of the WCC: The first feature is that homosexuals are to be treated as victims. Their situation is to be understood through the eyes of gay rights advocates—rather than through the eyes of homosexuals who struggle to be obedient to scriptural standards. The difficulties experienced by homosexuals are to be blamed upon societies and religions (including Christianity) that disapprove of their behavior. And the solution proposed will be to reframe the question as a matter of civil rights. Homosexuals, it will be maintained, have a right to receive the moral approval of both church and society. Any biblical teachings to the contrary will have to be ignored—or maybe even "deleted."

It is not clear that the majority of delegates in Harare will permit the World Council to go anywhere near this far in the legitimization of homosexuality. The Eastern Orthodox and almost all the Africans and Asians are sure to be ardently opposed. General Secretary Raiser, in a WCC briefing paper on the issue, has already suggested a reluctance to press for a definitive statement. He claims that "the great diversity of positions on these issues [of sexuality] among member churches from different theological traditions and cultural contexts would make a consensus statement impossible" ("The WCC, the Harare Assembly, and the Issue of Sexual Orientation," World Council of Churches press briefing, Sept. 29, 1998).

If the controversy over homosexuality becomes too intense, it appears that the WCC elite will ask the Assembly to authorize further study of the issue. This study, of course, could be a tactic for building pro-homosexual sentiment until it eventually prevails.

### **Where the Crusades Fail**

The WCC cannot be faulted for identifying the problems above as matters deserving the careful attention of the world's Christians. War, poverty, racial discrimination, sex discrimination, environmental degradation and threats to families and indigenous cultures cannot be ignored. Nor can it be said that the WCC's positions on these issues are all necessarily unwise. Many Christians, for example, might share the WCC's leanings toward pacifism and its misgivings about capitalism. But many other faithful Christians would not endorse these positions.

Yet even a Christian who found most WCC pronouncements politically congenial would nonetheless have to concede that they suffer from various shortcomings: (1) They cannot be derived directly from the teachings of Jesus, as conveyed in the Scriptures. (2) They do not take into account the inevitable disagreements among Christians on these practical matters, as to the best way of advancing the values of God's Kingdom. (3) They cannot be said to show any political balance, as they almost always reflect the current thinking of the secular Left. (4) They do not represent the views of the majority of the world's Christians, who are much more conservative theologically, morally, and politically than the WCC officials. These shortcomings rob the WCC's political

interventions of much of the moral influence that their authors would have wished them to have.

Taken together, the WCC's political crusades have consumed tremendous energy in the ecumenical movement. For the sake of these crusades, the council has been willing to sacrifice its unity, its member support, its reputation, and even sometimes its founding theological principles. It has been willing to ignore or attack fellow Christians, and to sponsor challenges to basic Christian doctrines. To score political points for feminism or environmentalism or indigenous rights, the WCC has been willing to commend pagan worship as a liberating experience. The public focus of many WCC meetings has shifted from the unifying, liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ to these divisive, partisan political messages.

## Two Opposing Options for Change

This diversion of the WCC is a grave concern for those who cherish the ecumenical hope. The sight of the world's foremost ecumenical organization increasingly divided, defunded, and discredited is cause for mourning. But it could also be a cause for repentance.

The WCC leadership appears to be conscious that significant change is coming. A brief history of the council on its website speaks of the need for "the renewal of the WCC." It asserts that this renewal "cannot come about simply by re-arranging the general structures, the programs and the Geneva offices." The website piece indicates that the "Common Understanding" document was intended to assist the process of renewal. It was supposed to offer "a comprehensive realistic analysis of the development, standstills and setbacks of the ecumenical movement in the churches since 1948."

But, as noted above, the "Common Understanding" document does not deliver on that promise. It does not give a full and honest account of the "setbacks" experienced by the WCC. It does not analyze how the council's leadership may have contributed to those setbacks. And it does not submit anything like a specific, sweeping plan for renewal.

The two biggest hints of possible future directions—the passage on "macro-ecumenism" and the section on "new forms of relationships" with more conservative churches—are buried fairly deep in the text. The Central Committee statement passes over each rapidly, without a sense of the radical implications that each holds. Nor is any awareness shown that the two suggestions are pointing in quite opposite directions.

## The Perils of Macro-Ecumenism

A move on to "macro-ecumenism" would push current WCC trends forward to a breaking point, at which the council would have to cast off its founding vision. By "open[ing] the ecumenical movement to other religious and cultural traditions beyond the Christian community," the WCC would be forced to redefine itself in every way.

It would have to find a new point of reference, a new constituency, a new message, and a new mission. Jesus Christ, his Church, his Gospel, and his Great Commission could no longer stand at the center of a "broadened" council.

What would replace them can be teased out of Konrad Raiser's latest book, *To Be the Church: Challenges and Hopes for a New Millennium* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997). The WCC general secretary discerns three principal tasks for the churches in the new millennium: elaborating "a life-centered vision" in their theology, coming to terms with cultural and religious pluralism, and responding to globalization. Note that leading people to faith in Jesus Christ does not appear anywhere on Raiser's list.

"One major challenge facing the ecumenical movement is thus the need to develop a life-centered understanding of the *oikoumene* [household of God] which embraces all of God's creation," Raiser declares (p. 19). He appeals to a past "key ecumenical insight, affirmed emphatically at the time of the WCC's fourth assembly (Uppsala 1968). . . that the scope of the *oikoumene* goes beyond the community of Christian churches to embrace the whole human community" (p. 49). Raiser concedes that there has been "controversy" about this "secular understanding" of ecumenism; however, he contends that now is the time "to recapture the wider meaning of the *oikoumene*" and even to extend it beyond humans (p. 49). He continues, "I would thus propose an interpretation of *oikoumene* as the 'one household of life,' and of our task as discerning the rules of living together in peace and wholeness as members of this one household where God through the Spirit dwells among God's people (Eph. 2:19-22)" (p. 50). Observe how the WCC leader has defined the task of the church without explicit reference to Christ—despite the fact that the Scripture passage that he cites (without quoting) identifies the cornerstone of the household of God as none other than "Jesus Christ himself."

In regard to pluralism, Raiser speaks of "the fading dream of Christian hegemony" (p. 21). One assumes that he means that sensible modern Christians must give up the apostolic hope that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Phil. 2:10). Instead, according to Raiser, we ought to "acknowledge cultural and religious plurality as enduring features of human society" (p. 21). We must "move from antagonistic competitiveness to communicative cooperation" between religions (p. 22).

Unfortunately, according to Raiser, "the exclusivism of parochial consciousness grows to a large extent out of religious beliefs, including Christianity" (p. 23). "Like all religions today, Christianity is challenged to reassess its long-standing exclusivist claims and to contribute to building a new culture which values and sustains plurality" (p. 23). For Raiser, evidently, Christianity must learn that it is just another religion. Claims to "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5)—upon which the ecumenical movement was founded—will just have to be "reassessed" if they seem too "exclusivist."

The negative side of globalization, Raiser suggests, “underscores the primary task of Christian churches to further the process of reconstructing sustainable human communities” (p. 26). He sees the WCC’s attempts to sponsor a process of churches covenanting together for “Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation” (JPIC) as a model effort to “strengthen forms of civil society over against the existing political, social and economic structures” (p. 26). He cites enthusiastically the ten affirmations of faith posited by a 1990 WCC convocation in Seoul. Of these, only one makes any mention of Jesus Christ. And that vague phrase (“the peace of Jesus Christ”) makes no claims for Christ as God, Savior, or Lord.

Similarly, Raiser is impressed by the “Declaration Towards a Global Ethic” authored by Hans Kung and proclaimed at the 1993 Parliament of World Religions. The “four irrevocable directives” (non-violence, a just economy, tolerance, and equal rights) in that ethic all express the human ambition to build a better kingdom on earth. None makes any reference to God much less Jesus Christ. Yet Raiser is thrilled: “The whole Declaration is a clarion call for a ‘transformation of consciousness,’ a ‘conversion of heart,’ especially among religious believers,” he says (p. 38). Apparently, conversion to left-leaning social ideals ranks above conversion to Jesus Christ in Raiser’s estimation. This seems to be the meaning of “macro-ecumenism.”

### **The Promise of Reaffirming Christ**

So, there remains the other option that is broached in the “Common Understanding” paper. The WCC could reach out to the alienated Eastern Orthodox and the separated Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals. If these “new forms of relationships” involved merely regular conversations, then perhaps they would do little to change the WCC. But if they were aiming toward a deeper and wider Christian unity, the changes would have to be radical. The rest of the Christian community will not find the WCC, as it now stands, to be a suitable ecumenical partner. There would be even less interest in a World Council that had turned toward “macro-ecumenism.”

A WCC that is serious about renewing *Christian* ecumenism must be *more* Christocentric than it has yet been. It must be more clearly guided by the authoritative witness to Christ that comes through the Scriptures and the universal Church. It must attend more diligently to its own responsibilities in announcing God’s plan in Christ to all the world. It must focus more eagerly on the hope of Christ’s rule over all. These are the matters in which Eastern Orthodox, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Catholics could find unity with the WCC.

But truly saying yes to these marks of Christian identity would also necessitate saying no to many other aspects of the council’s recent history. The WCC would have to disinvest most of the energies and moral authority that it has poured into political crusades which are not authorized by the Scriptures, and which many other Christians could not condone. It would have to clarify that its mandate comes

not from the cries of the victimized, but from the commands of Christ. It would have to align its perspective more with the Christians in the pew, and less with the demands of leftist “popular movements.” WCC theologians would have to cease their pattern of using social objectives as a reason to overturn classic Christian teachings. They would have to stop praising pagan practices as healthier for women or the environment or indigenous people.

### **The Responsibility of Presbyterians**

It should be evident that U.S. Presbyterians have a tremendous stake in which course the WCC chooses. Our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Order warns us that “while divisions into different denominations do not destroy this unity [of God’s people], they do obscure it for both the Church and the world.” Therefore “the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to the reduction of that obscurity and is willing to seek and to maintain communion and community with all other branches of the one, catholic Church” (G-4.0203).

The search for Christian unity is too important to abandon it. The only judgment to be made is whether the WCC is the proper vehicle in which to pursue that search, or whether we must look for another. Either the WCC must be reformed to make it a more faithful and serviceable embodiment of a Christ-centered unity, or it must be allowed to wither away, so that some better embodiment may arise to take its place.

It seems unlikely that most Presbyterians would be prepared to make a sharp break with the WCC. They see much that is of value in the council. They are still moved by the vision of Christian unity that was proclaimed at Amsterdam in 1948. They could find several WCC programs of which they would heartily approve. As long as a comparable alternative to the WCC is not available, many Presbyterians would be reluctant to toss aside the imperfect body to which we now belong.

Certainly, Presbyterians would find it hard to separate themselves neatly from the World Council. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has played too large a role in the WCC to allow it to wash its hands clean of the council’s current mess. The WCC has become what it is, to a significant degree, because we U.S. Presbyterians have made it so. Prominent Presbyterians like John Foster Dulles were there at its founding. Former UPCUSA Stated Clerk Eugene Carson Blake was at the helm of the WCC during the crucial years of the 1960s and 1970s.

Currently, the PCUSA contributes approximately one-third of the U.S. support for the World Council. That amounts to over \$1 million per year—far more than any other single U.S. member denomination, including several with far larger memberships than the PCUSA. (Figures come from the WCC’s own financial reports.)

## Means of Influence

All these ties that bind U.S. Presbyterians to the WCC simply add to their responsibility in seeking its reform. At a minimum, they must send delegates to WCC meetings who will challenge the ecumenical status quo. Up until now, the PCUSA delegates have often been “ecumaniacs” who enthusiastically support the party line from Geneva. Conservative Evangelicals have been severely under-represented—partly perhaps because of an ideological exclusion, but also because of their own avoidance of uncomfortable encounters with the World Council.

In all these political efforts, Presbyterian representatives should make common cause with other WCC leaders—from Eastern Orthodox churches and evangelical denominations in developing countries particularly—who would share the same conviction of the need for reform. They should break their alliances with the Western European and North American leftists—who may be culturally closer to U.S. Presbyterians, but who are increasingly far removed from our confessional heritage.

The means of pressure, however, will probably need to be more than verbal. Frequently the message that is heard most clearly is financial. WCC officials know that they are losing the support and confidence of their claimed constituencies as they see their receipts steadily diminishing. They might hear an even clearer message if the financial pressure distinguished between those programs that are genuine expressions of Christian unity and those that have become divisive and damaging.

As long as the WCC hesitates in principle between its two options for an expanded ecumenism, and inclines in practice toward “macro-ecumenism,” the PCUSA has little reason to continue its disproportionate and exclusive support for the council. Presbyterians need to clarify for themselves that ecumenism is much bigger than the World and National Councils of Churches. Even the WCC recognizes, in its “Common Understanding” paper, that “the ecumenical movement is wider than its organizational expressions” (p. 9). Whenever Christians of different denominations work together on a Wycliffe Bible Translators project, or build a Habitat for Humanity house together, or hold a joint Good Friday service, then ecumenism is happening.

It might therefore be a useful exercise if the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), while reducing its disproportionate support for the World Council of Churches, would apply the funds released to other genuinely ecumenical efforts overseas. There would be many candidates for these ecumenical grants: Bible societies, relief and development organizations, missionary fellowships, and the like. The PCUSA might even consider a relationship with the World Evangelical Fellowship. It would not be inappropriate, in light of the fact that a large number of U.S. Presbyterians consider themselves to be Evangelicals. Such moves could prove to be educational within the WCC as well as among Presbyterians. They might help to illuminate the true course of ecumenism’s future.

# An Analysis of the Proposed Amendments to the Constitution approved by the 210th GA(1998) and Recommended to the Presbyteries for their Vote

by Stephen Eyre

## **B. Amending G.9.0503, G-14.0801a Regarding New Church Developments, Organizing Pastors and Commissioned Lay Pastors**

Are we going to grow and how are we going to grow? Christian Schwarz in his book, *Natural Church Development*, says that it is the nature of all living things to grow. If the church is alive, it should be growing. If a church is not growing it means that it is dead or there is something getting in the way. Quite a challenge! And one

with merit. If Charles Schwarz is right, then the task of facilitating growth in a church and the growth of churches is to identify, as best we can, restraints to growth and then remove them.

That seems to be the intent of Amendment B. It is intended to address problems in starting new churches which are created by our current polity. There are three different amendments within Amendment B. They come out of the Office of Church Growth and New Church Development

of the National Ministries Division of the General Assembly Council.

**B.1. On Amending G-9.0503 Regarding Changes to the Book of Order Dealing with New Church Development**

This amendment permits the presbytery to authorize a commission of presbytery to carry out the duties for new church development until a session can be elected. Until a session is elected a commission of presbytery may authorize a committee of a developing congregation to exercise powers normally exercised by a session

*Recommendation:* This approach is innovative and balanced. It provides adequate oversight by presbytery while allowing a congregation to take as much “ownership” of their mission and ministry as they can handle. It short in can be a means of opening up avenues of growth in a supervised way while not holding tight restraints that might choke passion and initiative.

**B.2. Amendments to G-14.05013f Regarding Commissioned Lay Pastors Service as an Organizing Pastor**

This amendment allows presbyteries to appoint a commissioned lay pastor as an organizing pastor of a new church development.

This amendment raises issues around our historical denominational commitment to an educated and theologically trained clergy. These issues seem especially crucial in relationship to the difficulties of new church development in general and specifically to founding a church that has a “Presbyterian identity.” Management expert Peter Drucker argues that new executives should not be sent out to pioneer new divisions of a company. He wrote that they didn’t have the background or experience to make the decisions required of them.

Drucker’s analysis has application to new church development. In the best of all possible worlds, we should be raising up theologically trained pastors who have a call to found new congregations and we should have a support system in place to sustain them. However, as a denomination, we aren’t raising up a host of theologically trained pastors who are moving out into pioneering situations.

In addition, many of the new church developments exist in remote areas among ethnic minorities or in recent immigrant communities. In these situations surely it is best for someone from that ethnic minority to provide indigenous leadership. And at this point we are not sending a stream of ethnic minorities to our seminaries for training.

So what do we do? Within the past couple of years we have created a means for presbyteries to provide significant training for commissioned lay pastors and we have allowed presbyteries to give them—with supervision,

for specified locations and times—almost all the powers and responsibilities of ordained clergy. This means that while commissioned lay pastors do not have the same level of training as our ordained clergy, they do indeed have training. And in many cases, very good training.

*Recommendation:* Upon weighing both pros and cons, with some hesitation, I believe that we should pass this amendment.

**B.3. Amendment to G-14.0801a Regarding a Commissioned Lay Pastor Serving a New Church Development or Other Validated Ministry**

This amendment adjusts the book of order to support B.2., allowing a commissioned lay pastor to do everything a minister of Word and Sacrament would do in establishing a new church or other validated ministry as designated by the presbytery.

*Recommendation:* This needs to be affirmed in order to execute B.2

**C. On Amending G-11.0404 to Aid in Implementation of the Formula of Agreement**

This amendment eliminates obstacles to entering into Full Communion according to the Formula of Agreements. Specifically it allows for permanent installation in a PCUSA congregation by ministers from other participating denominations. It also addresses pension plan issues allowing for the pension plan from the originating denomination to be retained if appropriate.

*Recommendation:* Since our denomination has already affirmed the Formula of Agreement, then it makes sense to put in place the institutional structures to make it work well. I believe we need to affirm Amendment C.

**G. On Adding a New W-3.316e to Provide for Homebound Church Members to Participate in the Lord’s Supper**

There are significant number of elderly and ailing people in our congregation that can’t make it to our regular communion service. A number of them are in retirement homes within a mile of our church. One of the most nourishing things we could do for these dear people would be to provide an opportunity to receive communion on a regular basis.

The only way that we can “legally” do this according to the Directory of Worship is to send an ordained minister, accompanied by another member of the church. As much as we would like to see this happen regularly, it doesn’t.

Amendment G. provides for members unable to attend a communion service to receive communion served by two or more ordained officers under the following conditions:

a) elements must served on the same calendar day as a direct extension of the invitation to receive communion which was extended to the congregation and that b) the Scriptures and prayers are offered along with communion so that there is a unity kept between Word and Sacrament and that c) those who served have been instructed by the session or authorized governing body so that liturgical resources are available, as well as, the theological and pastoral foundations of the sacrament.

The apostolic church historically has been very careful about who has the right to serve communion. Does this amendment honor that care and concern? I believe it does. It honors the Reformed understanding that communion is a shared activity of the gathered body of Christ, who is present when two or three are gathered in his name. Instead of merely a unity of place, not possible because of physical circumstances, it honors a unity of time, requiring the serving of the elements be offered on the same day. It honors the Reformed understanding of the apostolic nature of the church in that only those who are ordained officers,

that is, have received a laying on of hands and made a commitment to the faith given to the saints, may serve communion. It also honors the Reformed understanding of relationship between the Word and Sacrament as it requires a reading of the Scripture along with the elements. Finally, it honors the Reformed understanding that Christ is spiritually present in ministry during the sacrament by requiring those who serve the elements to be aware of the "pastoral foundations." Surely the heart of all pastoral dimensions of the sacrament is that Christ himself, ministers by his Spirit, to his people as they commune with him, by partaking of his body and blood.

*Recommendation:* That we vote to affirm it.

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*Stephen Eyre is a frequent contributor to Theology Matters. He is pastor at College Hill Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati OH, and author of numerous books and articles.*

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