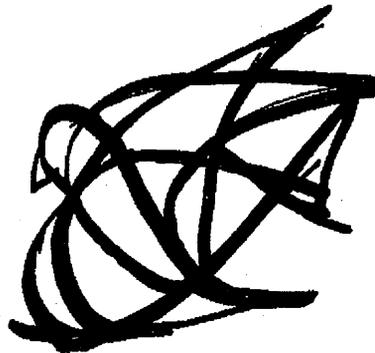

Features

The Quest for Unity World Council of Churches 7th Assembly, Canberra 1991

The World Council of Churches was inaugurated in 1948. Its constitution describes it as '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 Congress meeting in Canberra in February 1991 gathered about 3,500 delegates and visitors from more

than 100 countries representing 350 million Christians from 317 churches of almost all Christian traditions - Eastern Orthodox, Old Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, United, Independent (Lord Aladura, African



Israel Nineveh, African Holy Spirit, Assyrian, Hussite, Kimbanguist, Mar Thoma, and Philippine), Reformed (including Waldensian, Remonstrant, Mission Covenant, Congregational, and Presbyterian), Anglican,

Disciples, Brethren, Moravian, Pentecostal, Quaker, and Mennonite.

Traditions outside the membership - Roman Catholicism, Seventh-day Adventism and the Salvation Army - sent observers and participated in common worship. Guests from other religious traditions were invited and prepared in a special multi-faith consultation in Hong Kong in August 1990.

In their diversity they shared a common prayer: 'Come Holy Spirit - Renew the Whole Creation!'

Problems and Prospects of Ecumenism

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Ecumenism has various inherent ironical or paradoxical aspects. An examination of the causes and consequences of these incongruities is important in understanding the past outcomes, the present position and the future prospects of the ecumenical movement.

Perhaps the most fundamental irony of ecumenism is that although so many churches or denominations have professed a desire for Christian unity, so few have actually succeeded in overcoming the barriers to union. It has been argued that this is not really an incongruity, because 'unity' and 'union' are not the same; one can have one without the other. Even if this is conceded, it must be recognised that many attempts at achieving greater Christian unity, whether in the form of church union or in some other form, have not fulfilled the hopes of those most actively engaged in the particular processes. Though this has led some to despair of ever making much further progress, others have pointed out that relationships between many churches are more cordial now than they once were and that experience has shown that patience and persistence are essential if deep-seated and long-standing differences are to be resolved.

One reason why events have not fulfilled the hopes of some ecumenists lies in another irony, namely that efforts to unite different denominations have tended to produce intra-denominational conflicts or, more generally, that the quest for unity is itself a source of disunity. The root of this irony frequently lies in the fact that

existing denominations have different parties or factions within them. Such parties may themselves be a continuation of streams which existed in formerly separate denominations, as in the case of the 'high' and 'low' wings of Methodism, or they may be present in denominations which are not themselves the result of amalgamations, as in the case of the Catholic, Evangelical, and Central parties in the Anglican Church. In a further irony, denominational factions which would usually be somewhat opposed to one another have sometimes formed a temporary alliances in opposition to particular unity proposals. Thus, some Anglo-Catholics and Anglican Evangelicals formed such an alliance in opposition to the 1971 Plan of Union involving five denominations in New Zealand.

Opposition to particular proposals for unity sometimes springs from another irony, namely that in drawing nearer to one ecumenical partner there is a danger of moving further from other potential partners. Reginald Fuller (1967: 11) states this quandary for the Anglican Church as follows:

The genuine Anglican ecumenist always looks three ways: to Rome, to Eastern Orthodoxy and to Protestantism....It means that while we desire unity in all three directions, we must never take a step in one direction that would take us further away from the other two. The price is that Anglicans often initiate movements toward unity, but when a scheme has

been worked out they begin to find objections and withdraw at the last minute.

Peter Staples has suggested another way of viewing this outcome. He hypothesises that churches which have parliamentary styles of decision-making but which are sharply divided on ecumenical issues are likely to participate in the ecumenical process in order to satisfy their pro-ecumenical members; however, in response to other members who wish to maintain their traditional denominational identity, such churches are likely to reject specific union proposals.

Inevitably, too, the processes of official dialogue or negotiation between denominations must be entrusted to relatively small numbers of elected or appointed persons. In the course of their conversations, such representatives of different denominations may develop a growing trust and understanding of one another. By contrast, the large numbers of rank-and-file members are unlikely to have such intensive and extensive contact with their counterparts in the other denomination(s) involved. Consequently, there is less opportunity for them to develop similar trust and understanding. This can become a critical problem when the results of the dialogue or negotiation are presented for 'reception' within these denominations.

Because of the danger that dissidents will refuse to be part of any new arrangements and, in the some cases, that they will claim to constitute a 'continuing' church which maintains its traditional beliefs and practices, a high level of consensus is usually required for the adoption of proposals for church union. Here there is a double irony: if, in order to minimise the possibility of there being a viable 'continuing' church, a very high majority

is required in favour of a particular proposal, there is a danger that a small minority can thwart the wishes of the majority. If, on the other hand, a relatively small majority is all that is needed for adoption of such a proposal, the risk of there being one or more 'continuing' churches increases, provided that there is no legal impediment to their formation or functioning; in an extreme case, one could end up not only with a church formed by union but also with as many 'continuing' denominations as had existed prior to union. In the case of the Uniting Church in Australia, which involved a merger of three denominations, there have been two 'continuing' denominations; so there are now no fewer denominations than there were before, though the relative sizes of the denominations have changed.

Behind many of the conflicts over ecumenism lie various hopes, together with corresponding fears. Whether such hopes and fears are well grounded in any particular case is itself a matter over which there may be conflict of opinion. Some of the main hopes and fears will now be examined.

One hope is that a united church would be more inclusive than any existing denomination. This inclusiveness could, in principle, embrace not only differences of Christian tradition but also social and cultural differences such as those of class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. In other words, unity would not be incompatible with legitimate and fruitful diversity. The corresponding fear is that unity might demand uniformity, stifling legitimate and creative diversity, perhaps by rather authoritarian means.

Another hope is that unity would enable a fuller apprehension and expression of the whole truth of the Christian

faith, by comparison with which the witness of the existing denominations is seen to be incomplete. Against this is the fear that the attainment of unity may, through compromise, lead to a sacrifice of essential aspects of the Christian faith or to a form of indifferentism with respect to some such aspects.

A third hope is that unity would enable the church more adequately to fulfil its mission in the world. The countervailing fear is that unity may involve the creation of an organisational structure so cumbersome as to frustrate any such expectation.

A fourth hope is that unity would be both an expression of, and a stimulus to, church renewal. This hope is sometimes spoken of as the 'Protestant principle', *ecclesia semper reformanda*, though it is fair to say that the Roman Catholic church has, especially since Vatican II, also shown its concern for renewal. The corresponding fear is that vital tradition, sometimes termed 'the Catholic substance', would be lost.

Other hopes and fears may motivate some advocates or opponents of particular proposals for unity. For example, some might hope or fear that a united church would wield more worldly power. One could summarise various hopes and fears by saying that advocates of ecumenism hope that it will lead to a fuller manifestation of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. Opponents fear that some particular proposals for ecumenical rapprochement would create at least as many problems as they solved, perhaps by preserving the bad with the good, by dividing as well as uniting, or by losses along with the gains. If such fears were realised, the result would certainly be ironical.

Martin Marty (1969: 95) has pointed to other ironical aspects of the ecumenical movement: 'Born of lay, student and missionary impulses, the movement has become technical and clerical in its later stages.' It is worth examining in more detail the contrasts Marty alludes to. First is the contrast between, on the one hand, a predominantly lay movement and, on the other, one dominated by clergy. While it would be inaccurate to see the birth of the ecumenical movement simply as a product of lay initiatives, the contribution made to its development by the Student Christian Movement, a predominantly lay movement, was considerable. As the ecumenical movement became more institutionalised, its leadership became increasingly clerical, and much of its agenda became dominated by thorny issues associated with the reconciliation of ministerial orders in different denominations. Bryan Wilson (1966: 125-141) has made a somewhat related but slightly different point. He notes that although the dissenting movements of Protestantism were originally either lay movements or movements which gave a greater place to lay persons than did the churches from which they dissented, such movements have gradually come under the control of a clerical class. According to Wilson, it is members of the latter category who are the main proponents of ecumenism.

While there is undoubtedly much truth in Marty's and Wilson's analyses, it is important to recognise that current attitudes of both clergy and laity to ecumenism are more complex than the above summary comments might suggest. Though 'official ecumenism' is generally dominated by clergy, it has also often been clergy, especially on the Anglican side, who have been the most vocal opponents of particular ecumenical schemes. Habgood

(1983: 146-147) has argued that although laity often resist merger proposals which might result in the closure of a local church or chapel to which they belong, they often 'express impatience at what they see as clerical intransigence on the subject of unity, and the wearisome concentration in ecumenical negotiations on the status of the clergy themselves.' To that extent, the laity are sometimes more ecumenical in sympathy than are at least some clergy. In a survey conducted in the late 1960s, which was when Marty's and Wilson's comments were written, Mol (1971: 133) found that about two-thirds of Australians would like to see their denomination unite with one or more other denominations. Unless things have changed dramatically in the last twenty years, it would be wrong to assume that the majority of the laity no longer have any interest in ecumenism.

Marty notes that whereas there were significant student contributions in the early stages of the ecumenical movement, it is no longer a young people's movement. It is possible to suggest at least two reasons for this shift. One relates to the notion of youthful rebellion. Whereas students once rebelled against the constrictions imposed by inherited denominational differences, those who now wish to rebel are more likely to object to the institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of ecumenism than to the existence of denominational differences, which in any case have become more muted because of the at least partial success of the ecumenical movement. Perhaps another way of saying this is that young people in particular tend to set much store on novelty, and the novelty of the ecumenical movement has now worn off. What William Temple described fifty years ago as 'the great new fact of our

era' has become, in the words of Harry Williams (quoted in Runcie, 1988: 334), 'the last refuge of the ecclesiastical bore'. Secondly, many thoughtful people now perceive that the most destructive divisions, whether within the churches or in the wider society, are not those based on denominational differences but rather those stemming from differences of class, race, sex, age, nationality, ability or disability, and the like; hence the seeking of justice, peace and the unity of humankind, which is sometimes termed 'secular ecumenism', has a much greater urgency than simply seeking inter-denominational rapprochement. Secular ecumenism is, however, just as church-dividing as is ecclesiastical ecumenism, and perhaps even more so. This fact throws doubt on the second part of an adage coined within one of the early strands of the ecumenical movement: 'doctrine divides; service unites'.

Marty also alludes to the missionary impulses which contributed to the development of ecumenism, hinting that such impulses are not so prominent in ecumenism now. There are several aspects of this shift. There is not now the same optimism among ecumenists as there was when John R. Mott, an ecumenical pioneer and early leader of the Student Christian Movement, spoke of 'the evangelisation of the world in the present generation'. Secondly, experience has seldom (some would say never) fulfilled the expectation that the achievement of greater unity would lead to more effective mission. Ecumenism seems often to have become a substitute for evangelism. Thirdly, the denominations which today are most assiduous in evangelistic and other missionary activities tend to be the least interested in inter-denominational

mergers and other institutionalised forms of ecumenism.

Thus the above quotation from Marty highlights some of the ironies of institutionalisation as they have affected the ecumenical movement. There is also something of an irony in the fact that it has not proved easy to achieve or maintain agreement on the very fundamental issue of the nature of the unity for which ecumenists pray and work. This was apparent in both the Faith and Order and the Life and Work movements which preceded, but were eventually brought together in, the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.) in 1948. At its meeting in Toronto in 1950, the Central Committee of the W.C.C. received, and commended for study and comment in the Churches, a statement on 'The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches'. This statement declared that 'membership in the World Council does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Church unity' (W.C.C. Central Committee, 1950: 49). The statement went on to say that although the W.C.C. stands for Church unity, there are differences of opinion within it as to what this implies. Whereas some hold that visible unity in some form or other is essential, others 'conceive the one Church exclusively as a universal spiritual fellowship, or hold that visible unity is inessential or even undesirable...The whole point of the ecumenical conversation is that all these conceptions enter into dynamic relations with one another' (W.C.C. Central Committee, 1950: 49). As Newbigin (1951) pointed out, however, the World Council of Churches could be only provisionally neutral on the question of the nature of Church unity, because the Council was and is itself a form of unity. To try to remain permanently uncom-

mitted would, in effect, mean acceptance of conciliar ecumenism, as embodied within the W.C.C., as the normative form of Christian unity.

At the Third Assembly of the W.C.C., meeting at New Delhi in 1961, an attempt was made to go beyond the provisional neutrality declared in Toronto. The Assembly approve the following statement and commended it to the churches 'for study and appropriate action':

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptised into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all, and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people. (Visser 't Hooft, 1962: 116)

The Assembly went on to say, however, that 'we are not yet of a common mind on the interpretation and the means of achieving the goal we have described' (Visser 't Hooft, 1962: 117).

The 1968 Assembly in Uppsala extended the New Delhi vision by emphasising the universal dimension of church unity, speaking of a 'truly universal, ecumenical, conciliar form of common life and witness' and calling the churches to 'work for the time when a genuinely universal council may once more speak

for all Christians and lead the way into the future' (Goodall, 1968: 17). The 1975 Assembly in Nairobi combined the emphases from New Delhi and Uppsala, declaring that 'The one church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united' (Paton, 1976: 60).

In so far as the various denominations were ready to accept these definitions of the goal being sought, one can speak of a developing consensus that this would involve previously divided denominations submerging their separate identities in favour of a new identity which would be expressed both locally and universally. In partial fulfilment of this expectation, many negotiations for transconfessional church mergers took place in different parts of the world in the 1960s and early 1970s. The main denominations participating were Anglican, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian/Reformed. Baptists and Lutherans were much less frequently involved. Roman Catholics and Orthodox were not involved at all. These negotiations led eventually to mergers in places such as Zambia, Jamaica and Grand Cayman, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea and the Soloman Islands, Belgium, North India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Britain and Australia. The most comprehensive of these unions was in North India, where it involved Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Congregational, Disciples, Methodist and Presbyterian/Reformed church traditions. In all places other than the Indian sub-continent, union negotiations involving Anglicans have failed. In short, such transconfessional unions as have been achieved have generally been among Protestant churches, seldom involving Anglicans.

The churches created by organic union have not generally spanned national boundaries, a fact which has drawn criticism from John Macquarrie (1975: 26): 'The last thing the world needs is a series of national churches reduplicating the political divisions that already exist, and in some cases breaking up the international Christian communions (Roman, Anglican, Lutheran, etc.) which transcend national and racial borders.' This criticism points to the perhaps inevitable tension between the New Delhi vision of 'all in each place', where 'place' refers not only to local communities but also to 'wider geographical areas such as states, provinces or nations' (Visser 't Hooft, 1962: 118), and the simultaneous vision of unity with 'the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages' (Visser 't Hooft, 1962: 116). Granted that this two-fold vision has not yet been fulfilled, one could of course debate whether a united national church comes closer to it than do separate Christian world communions.

For various reasons, the Christian world communions have taken on added importance since the Second Vatican Council. When Pope John XXIII decided to invite to the Council observers from other Christian churches, the question arose as to how such persons should be appointed. Because the Roman Catholic Church has an international structure, and because in any case it was impractical to invite observers from each of the many member churches of the World Council of Churches, observers were invited mainly, though not exclusively, from each of the Christian world communions, such as the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and so on. Subsequent bilateral conversations involving the Roman Catholic Church have also

been conducted at this level, as well as sometimes at national level. There have, too, been similar conversations involving other pairs of Christian world communions, e.g. the Anglican-Reformed International Commission, the Anglican-Lutheran International Conversations, and so on.

These developments have led to the emergence of three models of Christian unity which are fairly similar to one another but somewhat different from the earlier concept of organic union. These models are those of 'a plurality of "types" within the communion of the one and only Church of Christ', 'a communion of communions' and 'unity in reconciled diversity'. The first of these models was foreshadowed by the French Roman Catholic ecumenist Dom Emmanuel Lanne and outlined in a speech given in Cambridge in 1970 by the president of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Willebrands. Willebrands foresaw a form of unity involving full 'communion of faith and sacramental life' (Vatican Decree on Ecumenism) but within which there would be a persistence of various 'types' of ecclesial life, each with its characteristic traditions of theology, liturgy, spirituality and discipline. These 'types' of ecclesial life could be thought of as corresponding to those found within various denominations or confessional families. A somewhat similar conception of unity has been put forward in the notion of a 'communion of communions', adopted by the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, and in the idea of 'unity in reconciled diversity', advocated by various European Lutheran theologians.

Advocates of these concepts see them as allowing for the persistence of

legitimate diversities, including confessional diversities, rather than their elimination in the name of unity. Critics see the concepts as implying little more than the peaceful co-existence of really divided churches. In particular, they raise the question of whether existing Christian world communions are to continue as a permanent feature of the ecclesiastical landscape and whether there is to be a continuing parallelism of authority structures at the local level. Another way of posing these issues is to ask how much diversity unity can and should encompass, whether at local or wider levels.

There are at least two sources of diversity among Christians. The first is the rich and, to some extent, ambiguous body of teachings associated with Christ from the very outset of the Christian movement. The second is the wide variety of social and cultural contexts in which the Church has existed and continues to exist. Most ecumenists accept that both these sources of diversity should be respected: the first, because any particular understanding and embodiment of Christian faith and life is likely to be incomplete and, in principle, able to be supplemented and perhaps corrected by other understandings and embodiments; the second, because God has created great diversity in nature and in human life, and Christ reveals his ubiquity as he relates to the wide variety of human personalities and cultures. It has therefore been a commonplace of the ecumenical movement that unity does not necessarily mean uniformity. Yet from a theological perspective there are presumably some limits to acceptable diversity, and from a sociological perspective there are presumably some limits to how much diversity can be accommodated within a particular structure.

Just as it is difficult to reach consensus on what is meant by 'church unity' or 'Christian unity', so it is also difficult to obtain agreement on what shall count as legitimate diversity within the Church or the wider society. As it seeks to address these issues, the ecumenical movement is likely to continue to be beset with various tensions. Included among these are the following:

1. Between a focus on the unity of the church ('ecclesiastical ecumenism') and a focus on the unity of humankind ('secular ecumenism').

2. Between the various levels at which ecumenism might be expressed: local, national and global.

3. Between the affirmation of existing identities and the adoption of new ones.

4. Between an emphasis on the reconciliation of systems of belief and structures of government ('faith and order') and an emphasis on other aspects (e.g. what were once called the 'non-theological' obstacles to unity).

5. Between Catholic substance and Protestant principle.

6. Between the agenda of Western and Northern churches and the agenda of Eastern and Southern churches.

7. Between comprehensive proposals and more limited objectives.

8. Between 'official ecumenism' and 'folk ecumenism'.

9. Between committed ecumenists and persons who are either opposed or indifferent to ecumenism.

While tensions such as these provide some of the dynamics of ecumenism, their interaction also imposes limits on ecumenical achievements. This helps to explain many of the ironies discussed in this article.

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The World Council of Churches - Dream and Reality

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Since 1948, when the World Council of Churches was formed in Amsterdam, there have been remarkable developments in ecumenism. Few could have dared to hope for the wholehearted way in which the Roman Catholic Church has contributed to the ecumenical movement. Nor would many have expected such a sudden ending to the fierce rivalries created by the establishment of a far flung Soviet empire such as we have seen in the last year.

Even the opponents of the WCC have been pushed to think and act ecumenically. Conservative Christians in the USA and Europe, led by Carl McIntire, formed the International Council of Christian Churches. Many Baptists have learned something about world Christianity through the Baptist World Alliance and others from Pentecostal origins have also begun to see that the World Council is not the satanic organisation that some of their leaders loved to attack. The Lausanne movement has held international congresses, which have brought together evangelicals and challenged them to reflect on issues which are not so different from those which preoccupy members of the World Council. That is entirely appropriate, for some of the most important movements which flowed into the streams that have led to the formation and expansion of the WCC had their origins in the confident Protestant expansionism of the 19th century. The formation of the Evangelical Alliance was an important step in partnership, as were the series of

missionary congresses in the late 19th century that preceded Edinburgh 1910.

The meetings of those involved in the Faith and Order movement and in Life and Work brought Christians together who still deeply disagreed, but recognised that there were realities of partnership which did not correspond to their ecclesiology. That was no great problem for those movements in Protestantism which sat light on the importance of the visible church. It was a great problem for Orthodox, Anglo-Catholics, and some Lutherans whose concern for pure doctrine made ecumenism a dubious enterprise. They could not simply cooperate, as though there were no theological issues to be worked through, especially on historic claims to be the authentic Church of Jesus Christ.

The network of leaders who emerged from YMCA, YWCA, and the Student Christian Movement had experienced partnership which transcended their denomination's definitions of communion. Yet they were deeply committed to creating a context where such issues could be explored at the deepest theological level. Visser t'Hooft, who became the General Secretary of the World Council and its elder statesman, was uncompromisingly theological in his approach to ecumenism, as well as a formidable administrator and politician. He and those who were on the Central Committee were determined to stay together to explore the deep questions about relationships be-

tween churches, which had not been comprehensively explored for centuries.

The basis for membership of WCC was a brief Christological statement, later modified by a reference to the Trinity. Member churches were not expected to modify their ecclesiology, though in fact willingness to recognise that there were 'Christians' outside their communion has implicitly altered the weight of exclusive claims made by Orthodox and other Christians. Roman Catholics, however, have not moved beyond observer status and then increasing co-operation, for many of their leaders appear to believe that the time is not yet ripe to weaken their ecclesiology by becoming a member. Other major Protestant churches like the American Southern Baptists and the Missouri Synod Lutherans have also eschewed membership, because they cannot compromise their distinctive doctrinal positions, for what they consider a dangerous agnosticism about fundamentals.

The World Council makes no claim to be a church itself, or a super-church. It is simply a partnership for the continued exploration of ecumenism. In virtue of the quality of leadership it has enjoyed, it has become very influential and widened and deepened the very meaning of 'ecumenism'. A number of organisations and activities have made a deep mark. Care for the millions of refugees created by the 1939-45 war and the division of Europe, and then the succession of wars in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East has been one of the most remarkable fruits of ecumenical partnership. Judicious contributions have been made to international affairs, often in ways removed from the public eye. Co-operation in medical issues, in religious education, and in the mass media has been of great importance

for the World Council and its member churches, providing sources of insight and expertise which no single church could provide alone. Liaison with the international agencies which are based in Geneva has given influential input of lasting value, even though it is rarely noted even in the religious press.

The routine administration of the Council has been done by a corps of international Christian leaders seconded by their churches or appointed by the Secretariat. North American and West German money has been indispensable for the everyday running of the Council and the co-ordination of a host of networks, for many of the partner churches have been unable to pay their dues fully, because of currency restrictions and genuine poverty. Looking at the WCC list of publications over 40 years is a striking reminder of the major initiatives that have been taken in matters theological, political, economic, in inter-faith dialogue. Some of these projects have been more in the public eye than others, notably the programme to combat racism. This initiative caused violent reaction in parts of Europe, North America, as well as being the target of a major disinformation campaign run by the South African government.

Such reactions are a reminder that action for justice, even when very modestly financed, can have great symbolic power by challenging common assumptions in the member churches and their nations. Many critics argue that the World Council has substituted political action for spiritual tasks, and in so doing totally distorted the historic faith by fostering revolutionary and terrorist violence. Their view of religion is sometimes privatised and secularised. Some activities of the World Council have been an important

reminder of the link between politics and religion, though like most international bodies it has chosen discretion rather than valour when members have protested violently against interference in internal matters of their country.

Some observers have professed to see a leftist, even Marxist, political bias in the activities of the Council, but Communist regimes have been equally vociferous in denouncing the Council's bondage to the interests of the USA and international capitalism. The membership of a number of churches from the Soviet bloc brought much suspicion from more conservative Protestants and those who were refugees from Communist regimes. They saw the partnership of churches and such governments as fatally compromising. The truth was complex and may never be known until archives are opened. The largest nation on earth - China - still has a government which is very suspicious of any ecumenical involvement by Chinese Christians. Nevertheless, the leaders of the World Council made a modest contribution to keeping open channels of communication between Christians under tyrannous regimes and the rest of the world church.

The frequent changes of staff work against continuity and give the impression of rather breathless change and innovation in the programmes sponsored by the World Council's many organisations. Internal struggles can be bitter and damaging and the appointments of General Secretaries have often been very difficult. Nevertheless, the succession of General Secretaries has been a very notable one and reminded the world church what a rich range of gifts can be found in the parts of the ecumenical movement linked with the World Council.

The Assemblies have been very high profile and gather Christians on a scale which would have been considered unthinkable a century ago. Though such large gatherings demand a high degree of control if they are to achieve any results at all, they provide a unique opportunity to experience the world wide impact of Christianity in both ancient and modern forms. Canberra in 1991 promises to be of importance equal to Amsterdam, Evanston, Uppsala, New Delhi, Nairobi, and Vancouver. It will offer Australian Christians a once in a lifetime opportunity to host a variety of Christian visitors. They could bring badly needed insight into the task of proclaiming the Gospel in our multi-cultural society, even if such insights are expressed in rather tortuous language.

Indeed the most remarkable feature of the WCC is the way it has provided a context for recognition that Christianity is no longer a European and American religion. African and Asian Christian numbers are growing with a rapidity which is too little appreciated in the West and North. The agenda of Christian theology and practice can no longer be set simply by the churches which founded the World Council and continue to fund it. Publications show a capacity to listen to the Christian experience of other cultures in a quite remarkable way. Even church history is being rewritten to take account of these new realities. The theologies present in the World Council are very heterogeneous and yet there is an astonishing degree of consensus that can emerge on baptism, eucharist, and ministry and on the continuing importance of ancient creeds.

Bi-lateral dialogues within and outside the context of the World Council also make a major contribution to ecumenically credible theology, but this awkward

partnership has significantly shaped the patterns and subjects of theological reflection in the last half of the 20th century. The World Council has also reminded Christians how central unity is to discipleship. Continuing to remind churches of their obligation to seek unity has not always been popular among its membership. There are clearly models of unity besides reunions of churches in particular regions and nations, but such united churches find the World Council a very important context in which to share their convictions and experience. Oneness may prove to have the same illusive quality as threeness, but every generation of Christians has to work at understanding the dialectic between unity and pluralism, or even downright divisiveness and schism.

Working as I do in an Ecumenical faculty and consortium of associated teaching institutions within the Melbourne College of Divinity is a constant reminder of the fragile strength of ecumenism. Those involved with the World Council of Churches and its organisations or networks also know how

true that is. They are painfully aware of the limitations of the World Council. Indeed some of its sharpest, most perceptive, yet most loyal, critics come from within. They see the human failures that disfigure the embodiment of the ecumenical hope. Yet they know that they cannot neglect to stay on pilgrimage. Ernst Lange's title says it all, when he describes the work and mixed achievements of the World Council of Churches in the book *And Yet It Moves*.

Australia has produced a significant number of committed ecumenical leaders and initiatives in two hundred years of Christian presence. Ecumenism here has not just been the passion of leaders among the clergy who have allegedly lost their identity and capacity to bear empowering witness to the Gospel. It has been bound up with the task of countless Christians to create a credible Christian presence, transcending imported denominations. Canberra 1991 could help us see how much further Australian Christians have to go into their ecumenical future.

Ecumenism in Australia

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Anticipating the Assembly

Stifling hot weather does not add to the attractiveness of spending a day in a College's Assembly Hall. Nevertheless, in spite of such weather conditions, 130 people from churches in Sydney and many country centres came together for a day shortly before Christmas. The com-

mon factor that brought them together on that occasion was their intention to be in Canberra during February 1991.

All were planning to be participants in the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches. There was an undeniable sense of anticipation amongst them on that day, as they heard the latest details of the planning and the programme for the

Assembly, as they shared their hopes for the Assembly and for ecumenism in Australia as a result of the Assembly, and as they talked with others from their own regions about the ways in which they could assist in taking the issues and challenges of the Assembly to their local churches.

The Assembly of the WCC is the most representative, and therefore the most significant and exciting, ecumenical gathering of Christians from around the world that has ever occurred. It will bring together 1,000 delegates from over 300 member churches of the WCC, as well as almost another 1,000 official participants, including representatives from the Roman Catholic Church and other non-member churches. Altogether, every Christian tradition will be represented by people who come from nearly every country of the world. The location of this, the seventh Assembly, in Australia gives people here the opportunity to experience first-hand the rich diversity of the Church, the Body of Christ, around the world. This experience has the marvellous potential to give a vigorous new lease of life to ecumenism in this country.

Even the preparation for the Assembly has allowed many people in our churches to witness something of this ecumenical renewal. Over 600 parishes formally linked up with the Assembly preparations, and many thousands of people in those and other parishes around the country took part in an excellent Bible study programme on the theme of the Assembly - often done in local ecumenical study groups. Reports of those studies plainly suggest that this was a taste of ecumenism that most people found enriching and refreshing, and stimulated a desire for more.

Such local expressions of ecumenism are essential to the whole ecumenical movement, which can only have life if it is well grounded in local congregations. It is at that level that we can begin to understand and appreciate the spirituality and commitment of Christians of traditions other than our own. But an Assembly of the WCC in this country gives Australian Christians an opportunity, that otherwise most would not have, of recognising that the Church of Jesus Christ is more diverse, vital and exciting than we have cared to imagine, of realising that we are part of that global Church, and of identifying how that global dimension has an impact upon our understanding of what it is to be faithful to God's mission.

General Meeting of the Australian Council of Churches

The sense of anticipation and optimism that, for many people, has characterised the preparation for the Assembly was also present at the General Meeting of the Australian Council of Churches that was held in Adelaide in mid-1990.

A highlight of that meeting was the presence of Philip Potter, the former General Secretary of the WCC, and his wife, Babel von Wartenburg-Potter. Together, and in a brilliantly complementary fashion, they conducted the Bible studies each morning of the meeting, while he also preached at the opening worship in St Peter's Cathedral and gave a public lecture at Flinders University. In presenting their Bible studies, he carefully and analytically discussed the text, and she imaginatively and experientially explored issues raised by the text. The studies gave a very solid biblical and theological grounding to the meeting.

The ACC is our national ecumenical body, the expression of a commitment of the thirteen member churches to the task of striving for the unity of the Church and of their commitment to one another. Those member churches are: Anglican Church of Australia, Antiochian Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholic Apostolic Assyrian Church of the East, Churches of Christ, Coptic Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Romanian Orthodox Church, Serbian Orthodox Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, The Salvation Army, and Uniting Church in Australia. In addition, there are four Observer Churches of the ACC: Lutheran Church, Presbyterian Church, Roman Catholic Church and Seventh Day Adventists.

At a General Meeting, held every two years, the programmes that the churches have undertaken to do together through the ACC are reviewed and new directions are chartered. Those programmes are carried out chiefly through the seven Commissions that have been established by the ACC for that purpose: the Commission for World Christian Action, Faith and Order Commission, Commission on Mission, Aboriginal and Islander Commission, Commission on the Status of Women, Church and Society Commission, and the Churches' Commission on International Affairs.

Involvement in God's mission of standing with and responding to the needs of the poor, suffering and oppressed people of the world has been a foundation of the ecumenical movement, because here is an essential aspect of their ministry that many of the churches have agreed to do together. In Australia, the best known expression of this ecumenical endeavour is the Christmas Bowl, which is

administered by the Commission for World Christian Action on behalf of the member churches. Through it those churches are able to respond to situations of disaster and human tragedy in many parts of the world, to support the resettlement of migrants and refugees, and to enter into partnership with churches and ecumenical agencies around the world to support programmes of people's development. It is largely through such ecumenical involvement that individual churches have grown into new understandings of development and partnership in their own programmes of overseas mission.

The outreach aspect of mission, usually called 'evangelism', has recently assumed new prominence in many churches, typified by the Anglican Church's 'Decade of Evangelism'. It was with enthusiasm and encouragement that the General Meeting heard of the Commission on Mission's initiative to invite a representative group of people from the churches concerned with evangelism to discuss together their programmes the co-operative sharing of resources. The formation of a Youth Task Group was one of many welcome developments at the General Meeting.

Expanded Ecumenical Bodies

The matter that received the greatest attention, and perceived as a distinct sign of hope for the ecumenical future in Australia, was the progress that had been made in two years towards the formation of an expanded, more inclusive, national ecumenical body. A report from a Working Group established by the ACC and the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference was warmly received and recommendations endorsed for the next steps

towards the achievement of that goal. Conversations that had already taken place between the ACC and the Lutheran Church resulted in that church now being represented on this Working Group, which has developed a programme of discussion at every level of the churches throughout the latter part of this year and into 1992 about the composition and shape of our national ecumenical body.

The formation of a more inclusive ecumenical body nationally would be a culmination of what has been occurring in state ecumenical bodies over a number of years, the most recent being the membership of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Parramatta - the first Roman Catholic member - in the NSW Ecumenical Council. These are all very positive signs about the state of ecumenism in Australia at the present time.

Of course, ecumenical bodies such as Councils of Churches are only one - though extremely important - expression of ecumenism. Another instrument that has contributed significantly to the health of Australian ecumenism is the meeting of Heads of Churches. Also there are many bilateral dialogues - representatives of two churches sitting down in conversation together about their own traditions and understandings and frequently tackling the hard issues of theology and ecclesiology that have divided them.

The Present State of Ecumenism

In terms of the present state of ecumenism in Australia there is a positive story to tell, and because of the many encouraging things that are happening, there

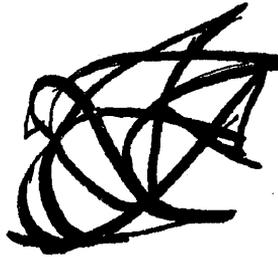
is a sense of being on the threshold of a new phase of our ecumenical history. But that optimistic anticipation has to be tempered by a realistic awareness of the impact of the ecumenical vision on the actual practice of ministry in the churches.

This is not to suggest that the leadership of the churches is out of step with, or too far in front of, the other members of the churches. It seems to me that there is wide support, even enthusiasm, for the kinds of things that churches do together through ecumenical bodies and for

prospects that those bodies become more representative and inclusive, and also that there is extensive willingness that Christians from different local churches should act together, such as the occasional service of worship

or study programme. But on the whole our patterns of ministry have not been radically altered, and there is no sign of such change in the foreseeable future. At every level of their life, each denomination continues to duplicate most of the programmes and patterns of ministry that the others perform, and some even run programmes that compete with those that they have supposedly agreed to do together through an ecumenical agency. The evidence for competition, or at best co-existence, continues to outweigh the evidence for co-operation.

Where there is evidence of co-operation - the sharing of resources, occasions for worship, prayer or study together - one easily detects an element of self-congratulations. There is a sense in which that is proper, because signs of co-operation are signs that we, who are the Church, have come a long way from the attitudes and behaviour of the past: on the



whole, we have become much more tolerant and accepting of one another. But a congratulatory attitude at this point is risky of deflecting attention from the wider vision.

A profound thinker and prolific writer on ecumenism, Michael Kinnamon, addressing a recent conference in Melbourne, warned of the vision of unity being increasingly lost from the ecumenical agenda. 'When tolerance becomes an end in itself', he said, 'then inter-church co-operation becomes a sufficient goal. But if the very integrity of the faith is at stake, if the renewal of the Church is at stake, then nothing less than the unity of Christ's Body will suffice'. He went on to remind his audience of some words of the great ecumenical leader of an earlier generation, Visser t'Hooft: 'churches can co-operate without being changed. They cannot participate in the total mission of the Church without their life being transformed'. The ecumenical vision demands such transformation, and must never be equated with inter-church relations.

Any analysis of the state of ecumenism in Australia at the moment certainly needs to take account of the promising potential of new initiatives and the challenge of a gathering of the world church in our midst. But a realistic analysis will also recognise that a deep commitment to the ecumenical vision is still to be attained. Inter-church relations, in the form of co-operation that demands minimal change to the conduct of ministry in each church seems largely to be a sufficient goal, and it is not easy to move beyond it.

However, the visionary goal of the ecumenical movement has been, is, and always will be the visible unity of the Church. That is not really an option: it is God's Church, not ours; and its unity is that for which Jesus prayed. How that unity is to be achieved, and what will be the model(s) that will give reality to the unity we seek, are matters to be prayerfully explored by the churches together. That the Church is called to be a sign of unity in the world by means of the visible unity of its own life is not really open to question.

The visionary goal of the ecumenical movement also has been, is, and always will be focussed on the unity, peace, wholeness - the *shalom/salaam* - of the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth. In other words, the vision is totally inclusive. Of course, here it is eschatological, for that ultimate unity is the gathering up 'of all things in Christ' (Ephesians 1:10). It is the consummation of God's mission. But the Church is also called to serve God's mission to the whole world. The ecumenical vision and challenge is expansive, pushing us out to global concerns, and inviting the churches to make a deeper commitment to each other - to go beyond co-operation - in responding to those concerns.

For those of us intimately involved, it is a dream that the Seventh assembly will be the catalyst that stirs our Australian churches to break new ground ecumenically. The state of ecumenism in Australia at the moment is such that it is ready for such a catalyst. Signs of new ecumenical possibilities do exist.

A Pacific Assembly? The Significance of the WCC's Canberra Assembly for Religion in Australia

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The World Council of Churches has a knack of being taken too seriously by those who disapprove of it - mainly conservative Christians, whether evangelical or catholic; of not being taken seriously at all by those - mainly in the media and academia - whose secularist predispositions blinker them to its true significance; and of not being taken seriously enough by those open minded and committed people throughout the world who could benefit greatly from its stimulation. This is a great pity because, for all its wrong turnings, its sometimes fatuous slogans and its air of being a bureaucracy which in defiance of Max Weber insists on remaining charismatic, the WCC is one of the most interesting organisations in the world and its decision to hold its VIIIth General Assembly in Australia is of the greatest significance. Though why it should have chosen Canberra, that most un-Australian of cities, is a matter of some puzzlement to me.

For students of religion, whatever our private views about Christianity, the WCC is a fascinating religious phenomenon in its own right. Though its membership does not include Roman Catholics and the more conservative Evangelicals, it embraces a remarkable variety of Christian traditions, whether of Eastern Orthodox, Western Protestant or more recent 'contextual' origin, and many who formally remain outside it collaborate with it on specific projects (e.g.

there are 12 Roman Catholic members on its key Commission on Faith and Order; 3 permanent staff members represent the Roman Catholic Church in Geneva; and a Joint Working Group formalises relationships between the Council and the Vatican).

The teeming variety of indigenous Christianity from all parts of the world is increasingly reflected among the 311 members of the WCC (most recently by the admission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea), and it is continually developing relationships with virtually every other religious tradition on earth, especially through its Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths. The WCC, to a much greater extent than most university departments of religious studies can aspire to be, a living laboratory of inter-church and inter-religious relationships, not just for their own intrinsic interest, but as they bear on most of the vital problems that preoccupy the contemporary world.

As a Roman Catholic I have found in the WCC a sort of home away from home, intellectually and spiritually. I wrote my theological dissertation in Germany in what was then, in pre-feminist days, called 'the unity of mankind', latterly 'the renewal of human community', as the linguistic underpinning of the World Council's attempts to link the biblical and doctrinal convictions of its members to the ethical positions it feels compelled to

adopt in the face of racism, economic injustice and the cultural effects of Western technology. Only later, when working in the Pacific surrounded by rampant Christian fundamentalist and the residual influence of indigenous cults, did I realise just how basic to the WCC's standpoint this theme is. Today this commitment to the 'human' as the counterpoint of Christian unity forms the context of the WCC's advocacy of women's issues, which led to the proclamation of an Ecumenical Decade in Solidarity with Women in 1988. Its humanism sets the WCC apart from the 'other wing' of Protestant Christianity and at the same time throws it together with the Orthodox - who joined it at New Delhi in 1961 - and the Roman Catholics, who seemed on the point of joining it at Uppsala in 1968.

A peerless organisation, then, without spot or blemish? Not at all; the WCC has often enough alienated both the general public and its own constituency by jumping to conclusions and adopting positions too hastily. Its forays onto the Australian scene have not been received very favourably: a team sent to investigate the situation of Aborigines managed to create the impression that it had come with its mind already made up, and the international conference of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in Melbourne (1980) was largely ignored by the media. The Canberra Assembly, however, deserves better treatment. For the first time ever, Australia has the chance to bring its own religious, theological and ethical concerns into the ecumenical mainstream. Aboriginal issues will take centre stage, but here too the Assembly provides the opportunity to place land rights and the memory of past injustices in the context of a spirituality of the land shared by many other indigenous peoples.

Their concerns have become a major focus of the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism, and they provide a prime example of the relevance of one of its most important undertakings in the years between its Vancouver (1983) and Canberra Assemblies: the 'conciliar process' for justice, peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC). Unfortunately, the Seoul 'convocation' on this theme in March 1990 failed to formulate a theology capable of expressing the interrelationships involved, a legacy with which Canberra will have to deal.

The Australian churches understand themselves as hosting the Assembly on behalf of Christians throughout the Pacific Islands, who will furnish plenty of other issues such as East Timor, Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, New Caledonia and environmental damage by fisheries and forestry, nuclear testing and dumping. It is to be hoped that over and above the passing of resolutions on issues, however, we hear the voices and the theologies of those immediately affected. This should mean a salutary shift of focus from Australia's internal concerns to its Pacific role. Multi-culturalism may be a statistical fact, though the actual numbers of adherents of religions other than Christianity are tiny, but the mere juxtaposition of different cultural groups does not automatically forge inter-cultural relationships. Accepting the multi-culturalism of the region and coming to terms with multi-culturalism on the continent go hand in hand. The way it handles these issues will largely determine the contribution the Canberra Assembly makes to religious life in Australia.

Even more urgently, this Assembly will be dominated by the Gulf War. Taking up a credible position towards it while it rages is possibly the severest test

a WCC Assembly has ever faced. In the Middle East so many of the most intractable problems of the ecumenical movement come to a head the multiplicity of mutually hostile Christian denominations and factions; the dialogue with Judaism, continually frustrated by the intransigence of Israeli politics; the dialogue with Islam, seemingly snuffed out by the desert wind of Arab passion; the potential for an ecological catastrophe of unimaginable proportions; the pressure put on the new order of things just taking root in Europe; the moral ambivalence of Western commitment to a war which has every appearance of a latter-day crusade... The Assembly provides the spectacle of Christians from so many different backgrounds and in consultation with representatives of many other religious traditions coming to grips with this Pandora's box of problems.

For the first time ever, the WCC's VIIth Assembly takes as its theme, not a

statement about some aspect of Christ's saving work (*Hope* - Evanston, 1954; *Light* - New Delhi, 1961; *Freedom* - Nairobi, 1975; *Life* - Vancouver, 1983), but an invocation of the Holy Spirit, asking her to 'renew the whole creation' rather than focussing on some aspect of salvation. This recalls the theme of the watershed Assembly at Uppsala (1968): 'Behold, I make all things new'. The WCC has no jurisdiction over its members and its authority is strictly moral; the purpose of its Assemblies is neither to legislate nor to promulgate, but to celebrate and to bear witness. If it can do this without moralising, it has a fair chance of going down well in shoulder-shrugging Ockerland. If it loses its nerve or its balance, it could come a cropper. Either way, it will provide us with a religious event of rare richness and complexity.

Unity in Diversity?

Some Impressions of the WCC 7th Assembly

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It is impossible in a short piece to touch upon the many complex themes and agendas overtly, and covertly, pursued by the 5000 or so people who congregated in Canberra this February to celebrate the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Neither is it possible, or appropriate here, to express adequately the sensations and experiences of being part of a vast crowd of delegates, visitors, press, and observers gathered from around the world to share in worship and

to invoke the intervention of the Holy Spirit to renew the abused and shattered creation.

As I was representing the *Australian Religion Studies REVIEW* and part of the press corps I had access to a number of debates and time to meet and discuss with various people and groups. Rather than try to summarise all the proceedings I will concentrate on those most particular to the study of religion.

From this point of view the main programme of the Assembly was rather disappointing. Much of the discussion and debate was focused on what I see as 'applied' interests, chiefly the Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation issues. I suppose it was inevitable given the timing of the Assembly that the Gulf War assumed a prominent place; there was also considerable, often emotive and biased, emphasis given to the situation of the Australian Aborigine. Beside these, other applied issues such as the environment, the role of women, the place of youth, the opening of Eastern Europe, the situation in the Baltic, political changes in South Africa, the 'differently abled', which in the planning had looked like fruitful areas to develop, were given little consideration.

Even these applied areas were not treated with completeness and rigour. As a researcher concerned with empirical social research, I were disappointed to note an absence in the presentations and documents of any significant material gleaned from current social data and applied social research. The inadequate amount of time for serious discussion of too many issues was one of the reasons for this absence, but it does not justify it.

The concentration on applied areas also eclipsed the discussion of the central basis of the WCC - ecumenism. It appeared to be taken for granted but neither exposed to informed criticism nor developed in any formal way. It was apparent through the discussions, and through several events which occurred, that there is still a long way to go in achieving visible unity but there seemed to be a reluctance to discuss the issue openly, to accept and address the possible areas of conflict, or to aim at a workable consensus on the issues still to be resolved.

It is the question of unity - within the existing WCC fellowship, between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), and among people of other living faiths - which I will explore in the remainder of this article.

Christian community as koinonia in the Spirit

In the text prepared by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, and adopted by the 7th Assembly, the unity of the church is defined as 'a koinonia given and expressed in: the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognised and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to all people the gospel of God's grace and serving the whole creation.' Within this understanding the calling of the church is 'to proclaim reconciliation and to provide healing, to overcome divisions based on race, gender, culture, colour, religion or doctrine, and to bring diversity into communion with God.'

While unity and diversity are accepted as twin elements in Christian Koinonia, all members stress that diversity must have limits, and the limit is 'the confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, the same yesterday, today and forever'. The unity is accepted, the definitions and sentiments endorsed yet there appeared a determined reluctance to face the divisions which continue to impede the attainment of the koinonia. Principal among these are the divisions which prevent member churches from sharing the eucharist together and those which make

it impossible to recognise the ministry of others.

Considerable progress has been made towards unity since the 6th Assembly, and the General Secretary of the WCC, Emilio Castro, pointed several gains out in his opening address. Among these are the encouraging process of the reception of the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document; the increasing participation of the Roman Catholic Church in regional, and national councils of churches; the recent meeting of the Christians of South African after thirty years of separation; the entry of 38 new churches, including the China Christian Council who were admitted during the Assembly, into the family of the World Council of Churches; the meetings of representatives of the Christian churches of the two Koreas; the recent theological agreements concluded by representatives of the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox families, bringing them close to full communion after 16 centuries of separation.

Despite these gains Castro urged the Assembly to give renewed attention to two concerns. First, he claimed that although cooperation between churches is increasing, the processes of unity are slowing down. While there is no lack of good will for church unity, there is a lack of ardour and impatience. It is taken for granted that we cannot get beyond our confessional divisions.

Secondly the General Secretary voiced the concern that the convergence towards doctrinal unity does not necessarily imply corresponding progress in the field of unity and does not overcome the divisions of history. This concern was also echoed by British theologian Mary Tanner when, in introducing the sub-theme 'Spirit of Unity - Reconcile your People', she suggested that the churches had yet to accept

the challenge of living together with those they may oppose and must learn to live with and bear the pain of unity.

Russian Orthodox Archbishop Kirill warned of the possible divisiveness of the ideological aspects of nationalism and fundamentalism. Ironically, in the closing plenaries even as delegates celebrated the unity and fellowship achieved through their deliberations, they publicly acknowledged and affirmed the formal division of the Council of Churches of Ateoroa-New Zealand into separate Maori and European elements.

Two new sources of possible division within the fellowship were identified by Archbishop Kirill as the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopacy and 'a tendency towards syncretism with non-Christian religions'.

The second of these threats was brought into living experience during the Assembly in the repercussions and cries of apostasy which followed a presentation on the main theme by Korean feminist theologian Professor Chung Hyun Kyung. In her presentation Chung invoked the spirits of those who had been martyred and murdered throughout history, the spirits of Earth, Air and Water, flora and fauna which have been exploited, and linked these '*Han*ridden-spirits' with the 'spirit of the Liberator, our brother Jesus, tortured and killed on the cross'. She also urged a move from Anthropocentrism to 'Life centrism' which acknowledges the equality of all created things.

Among the points made by those taking issue with Chung were: because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, a theology of the Holy Spirit must arise from a theology of Christ and of the cross; we need to be more honest in claiming the Holy Spirit for our particular causes; we need a far more comprehen-

sive study of the doctrine of the Trinity; it is the task of every church to Christianise the culture, but not to accept and absorb it uncritically; the first apostles lived within the ideologies and cultures of their time but saw the faith as a critique of that culture and a springboard for proclaiming the gospel.

The main opposition was from the Orthodox who saw Chung's presentation as negating the uniqueness and redemptive work of Christ and equating the Christian message with every other religious affirmation and tradition. Dr Tarasar from the American Orthodox church, while supporting Chung's attempt to relate the gospel to local culture and traditions, expressed the opinion that Professor Chung had failed 'to discern the point of discontinuity, which takes something which has not been understood as Christian, and adds the particular characteristic which would make it acceptable within the Christian context'.

Chung responded to the angry reaction of the Orthodox to her presentation by pointing out that they too had drawn on their culture and taken some elements out of it. Chung claimed that the main basis for disagreement was that between the establishment and the dispossessed. She responded that the underneath the labels of syncretism, paganism and apostasy is the problem of power, and that the new Third World theologies are 'a new paradigm, a new wine' that cannot be put in the 'old wineskins' of literal and analytical male-oriented Western theology.

Others entering the debate urged a greater openness to Chung and other new theologies, saying the WCC represents a plurality of cultures and experiences and should accept a plurality of theological methodologies; the linking of the gospel

to the culture is not only legitimate but essential, and has been the task of theologians of every time and place; it is time to move away from rationalist theology to recognise that people, communities and cultures are essentially spiritual; notions of paganism are relative; the Holy Spirit is not possessed by people or theologies but can be identified by its fruits and its witness to Jesus Christ.

The threat to unity and the issue under debate were in part resolved by a statement issued by the Orthodox participants where they reaffirmed their commitment to work for church unity but counselled the Assembly to beware of an 'increasing departure from the Basis of the WCC'. They cautioned that they perceived a 'growing departure from biblically-based understandings of

- a) the Trinitarian God,
- b) salvation,
- c) the 'Good News' of the gospel itself,
- d) human beings as created in the image and likeness of God, and
- e) the Church, among others'. They reasserted their belief that 'pneumatology is inseparable from Christology or from the doctrine of the Holy Trinity confessed by the Church on the basis of Divine Revelation'.

The Orthodox found new, but not surprising allies, among the evangelicals at the Assembly. The chief concern of the evangelicals echoed a point made by the Moderator of the WCC that the WCC had remained unable to develop a 'vital and coherent theology'. Those of evangelical perspective, in a letter to the Assembly, maintained that the ecumenical movement 'needs a theology rooted in the Christian revelation as well as relevant to contemporary problems'. They claimed that 'at present there is insufficient clarity regarding the relationship between the

confession of the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to Scripture, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and the legitimate concerns which are part of the WCC agenda'.

Also among the constructive criticisms offered by the evangelicals was their concern at the failure of the Assembly to highlight the significant contribution of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians to the renewal of the church in its life and worship. Only four of the WCC's 317 member churches are Pentecostal, and the Pentecostal movement had often been ecumenically dismissed as divisive. Some Pentecostals oppose ecumenism as a human attempt to produce Christian unity, or because of genuine, theological differences concerning the nature of the Christian faith and its expression in the modern world. Others have sought fellowship with Christians outside their boundaries and the traditional churches need to be more open to the spiritual and theological insights that Pentecostals bring. The neglect of the Pentecostal perspective was even more surprising in the light of the theme 'Come Holy Spirit - Renew the Whole Creation'.

The WCC asserts that the challenge at this moment in the ecumenical movement as a reconciling and renewing movement towards full visible unity is to call all member churches:

- to recognise each other's baptism on the basis of the BEM document;
- to move towards the recognition of the apostolic faith as expressed through the Nicene/Constantinopolitan Creed in the life and witness of one another;
- on the basis of convergence of faith in baptism, eucharist and ministry to consider, wherever appropriate, forms of eucharistic hospitality;

- to move towards a mutual recognition of ministries;
- to recommit themselves to work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation linking more closely the search for the sacramental communion of the church with the struggles for peace and justice;
- to help parishes and communities express in appropriate ways locally, the degree of communion that already exists.

These were the guidelines for the 7th Assembly but the development of the programme revealed more of the divisions and difficulties to be overcome than it did any conscious attempt to discuss the elements of unity and encourage individual member churches to own them.

WCC - Roman Catholic Fellowship

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is not a member of the WCC and Archbishop Edward Cassidy, President of the Vatican Council for Promoting Christian Unity, stated that he did not see its membership as likely any time soon. When the General Secretary referred in his report to the lack of passion for ecumenism he stated this is particularly so with negotiations with the Roman Catholic Church where greater communication has promoted the option for plurality and the acceptance of division as a more or less inevitable fact of life.

There are however many signs of greater cooperation between the WCC and the RCC. Three of the eight regional ecumenical organisations - for the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Middle East - include Roman Catholic jurisdictions as full members. The same is true of about 35 national councils. Although Roman Catholics are not full members of the Australian Council of Churches, some

diocese are full members of state bodies in New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia, and Tasmania.

The RCC are also represented on a number of WCC Commissions, particularly Faith and Order, World Mission and Evangelism and roughly a quarter of the WCC Geneva staff are Roman Catholics. A 23-member Vatican delegation led by Archbishop Cassidy, and bearing a message from Pope John Paul II, observed the Assembly and there were many Roman Catholic press and visitors from Australia and overseas.

Last year marked the 25th year of the Vatican-WCC Joint Working Group (JWG) whose report on the period 1983-90 was received at the Assembly. The JWG has commissioned two excellent studies on 'The Church: Local and Universal' and on the notion of 'Hierarchy of Truths' which are included in the report. The Assembly accepted recommendations of the JWG to restructure and reduce its membership and gave it the primary task of 'assessing afresh the basis and common ground shared by RCC and WCC, and developing new perspectives for giving shape to this relationship. Among the obstacles and difficulties preventing a fuller relationship are various doctrinal, ethical, and practical disagreements which the JWG have been asked to explore.

One particular obstacle which was hurtful to many people during the Assembly was the sharing of the eucharist. An elective session of the visitors' programme 'Gathered Around a Divided Table' addressed this issue, as did an informal gathering of Catholic participants, a gathering of Orthodox, and a news conference.

A number of Roman Catholics at the informal meeting had taken strong objec-

tion to the official ban on shared eucharist. A Roman Catholic questioner at the press conference suggested that in line with the Vatican's stance on cooperation a concession could have been granted for the Lima Liturgy which formed a focal point of Assembly worship. Archbishop Cassidy replied that the eucharist, rather than being a step on the path to church unity, is 'the ultimate sign and seal' of church unity and was a step with many and major doctrinal implications.

Expressing the Orthodox viewpoint, Emilianos of Sylibria (Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople) said the early church gave two grounds for barring persons from the communion fellowship - immorality, and departure from the apostolic faith. On morals he said many churches have lost sight of the holy aspect of holy communion and they have absorbed 'the permissive age and permissive theologies'. He said the apostolic faith determines the validity of ministry and the communion celebrant. In their official statement, the Orthodox participants affirmed that their stance on eucharist was a matter of 'unity in faith and fundamental Orthodox ecclesiology' and that, like with the Roman Catholics, the eucharist is 'the supreme expression of unity and not a means towards unity'.

Obviously there is still a long way to go in the WCC-RCC discussions before consensus on the obstacles let alone the solutions can be reached. One suggestion to advance the union was for a joint international conference of WCC member churches and the RCC at the start of the next century. Another more radical, yet serious suggestion, advanced in a meeting of Anglicans was the possibility that WCC might follow the lead of the British Council and dissolve itself so a new body

with broader representation including the Roman Catholics could be formed.

Dialogue with People of Other Living Faiths.

The WCC set up a sub-unit on Dialogue in 1971. Its main aim is to promote understanding, cooperation, and friendship among people of different religions by arranging dialogues which respect the uniqueness of each religion while trying to help them to relate in ways that promote justice and peace. The Sub-unit aims to help the church and Christians cope with religious plurality and to re-think the Christian faith, its formulations, and its practices in the context of a multi-faith world.

About three times a year the WCC group meet with the World Muslim Congress and also the World Jewish Community. In preparation for the Assembly a multi-faith dialogue was arranged by WCC in Hong Kong in August 1990. On the basis of their discussions the group recommended that a new paradigm for working together and living out one's faith was needed. This paradigm, they suggested should be 'built on the common insights:

a) We all live in one *oikia*, one 'household'. The *oikoumene* embraces the whole inhabited earth with all its forms of life and all its families of faith. ...

b) In our interdependent world people of one religious tradition alone will not be able to find solutions to the ills of our time. ...

c) We must no longer do separately what we as people of many faiths can do together.

d) The plurality of human kind must be affirmed and so must the diversity of

gifts we offer to one another in our common life and struggles.

e) Interreligious dialogue is essential to this new paradigm of relationships.'

Interfaith relationships were highlighted at the Assembly when ten guests of other faiths (Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Shinto, Muslim) were presented at a plenary. These guests played an active part in deliberations and in Visitors' Programme sessions.

US rabbinical student Caryn Broitman stressed the need for interfaith dialogue on a personal level but saw it particularly important in helping to overcome the pervasive temptation to promote pluralism by turning religion into 'a private activity, a leisure-time affair'. She insisted that religion belongs in the centre of public life and that 'we can't leave it to the fundamentalists - of whatever religion - to put it there'.

In discussions both the Director of the Sub-Unit on Dialogue, Dr Wesley Ariarajah, and Muslim professor Mallam Ishaq Oloyede spoke of the need to carefully disentangle interfaith issues from social, economic and political concerns. On the one hand political, social and economic inequalities present serious obstacles to interfaith dialogue. On the other hand many political and socio-economic conflicts are dressed up in religious garb to serve political purposes.

These considerations were particularly significant at the time of the Assembly with the Muslim, Jewish and Christian groups involved in the Gulf region. The consequences of ignoring the need for interfaith dialogue were very vividly by Oloyede when, drawing on his Nigerian experiences, he reminded delegates 'the only alternative to dialogue is conflict; if you believe dialogue is bad, war is worse'.

Concluding reflections.

I don't think I can draw a conclusion to this paper any more than it is possible to draw fixed conclusions from the deliberations of the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. A lot of words have been used, a lot of issues raised, many challenges have been cast, and many invitations to reflection have

been issued. If the reluctance to confront basic assumptions I witnessed at the Assembly and the lack of fire for ecumenism referred to by Emilio Castro prevail it may come to little. Perhaps the WCC planners had a hidden agenda and a more personal prayer in selecting their theme 'Come Holy Spirit - Renew the Whole Creation'!

The Timing of *Nostra Aetate* of The Sociology of Jewish Dialogue.

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When the Catholic Church formally committed itself to a programme of ecumenism with the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* in 1964, it followed with a statement concerning its relations to non-Christians. *Nostra Aetate*, 'In Our Time', devotes its largest section to Jews and Judaism. This was not only the most liberal doctrinal document of its kind to have emerged from the Church, but it also represented a significant departure from the traditional aims of ecumenism.

The modern ecumenical movement was established at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910, in order to promote the unity of Christian denominations. Jews, by definition, had no place in the vision of a united Christianity, other than as potential members of its Churches. Ecumenism, springing as it did from the Protestant evangelical movement, was indeed wedded to a missionary programme, that saw the greatest number

of organised missions to Jews than at any time before or since.

And yet, as with ecumenism, missionary efforts to Jews were a largely Protestant phenomenon. Conspicuous for their paucity were Catholic missions to Jews. There are several reasons for this, some theological and some sociological. The most obvious theological reason, from the Catholic point of view, was that the covenant with Abraham was broken and clearly replaced by that with Christ. The Jews were persistent in their adherence to the defunct covenant, and showed no signs of being brought in to the Church in a big way. Moreover, when there had been a large influx of Jews into the Church - usually to avoid persecution or discrimination, as during the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions and in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries - the church found itself facing the problem of 'Judaizing' tendencies, which was less compatible with the theology of

Catholicism than it was with Protestantism.

There are also sociological reasons for the Catholic eschewal of missions to Jews. In Britain, where the ecumenical movement had its beginnings, and in America where it also flourished, Catholicism was a minority religion. Only recently enfranchised in Britain, and experiencing persecution and discrimination in America, Catholicism had a marginalised existence similar to Judaism. It is a sociological truism, that minorities in a hostile or alien environment are primarily concerned with preserving their communities and traditions intact, and they do not normally seek to complicate the terms of their survival by welcoming in foreign elements. Such openness is the privilege of the well established, even if flagging, national religions or of the religions associated with colonial powers.

By the time the Catholic Church formally committed itself to a programme of ecumenism, in 1964, so much had changed in the religious landscape of the West, that the missionary programme to the Jews, with which ecumenism had once been associated, was no longer popular. Vast migrations from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe transformed the religious profile of English speaking democracies. The hegemony of Anglo-Protestantism faded, and it became feasible, for sociologist, Will Herberg, to speak of the Protestant-Catholic-Jew triumvirate in America. His seminal work, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955, 1959) virtually enshrined the equal status that these three major traditions had come to enjoy.

Will Herberg was not alone in proclaiming the three major traditions as vital to the fabric of modern American society. Gerhard Leski's *The Religious*

Factor (1961), examined the extent to which one's religion was correlated to one's social, political and economic fortunes. The prolific sociologist of religion and Catholic priest, Andrew Greeley, also traced the socio-economic traits of Catholics and comparative groups, while serving as Director of the Center for the Study of American Pluralism (of the National Opinion Research Center). Sociologist, Marshall Sklare, examined the socio-economic and demographic features of 'An American Group', as he so named the Jewish community of Chicago (*The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, 1958).

What was increasingly apparent in this field of inquiry, was that religious communities were coming into their own, and that the church, the cathedral, and the synagogue were at least as important for maintaining these distinctive *social* groups as for promoting a set of specific religious beliefs. Indeed, as Protestant, Catholics, and Jews moved up the social ladder, their beliefs became more secular. Yet involvement in their respective religious communities continued, nonetheless, and, in many cases, strengthened, as the more educated and successful assumed leadership positions. The conclusion was the survival of the religious community transcended personal belief.

The importance of this development for inter-faith relations, was that, at least with regard to the three major traditions in the West, well established communities were now in place, each with a sophisticated infra-structure ranging from places of worship to community organisations and schools, all of which gave them an unquestioned stability. It was from this position of strength and a common vested interest in maintaining their integrity, that Protestants, Catholics and Jews could into

dialogue about issues that mutually concerned them. The Holocaust, for example, was becoming a topic of theological reflection. But there were other, more immediate issues just around the corner, that mutually concerned Christians and Jews.

The 1960s were a turbulent time. In the midst of a raging Vietnam War, there was widespread local opposition to it, violent student demonstrations against the 'white' and the University establishments (Lewis Feuer, the brilliant social historian who wrote *The Conflict of Generations*, (1969), was thrown down a flight of stairs in one of those demonstrations), there were violent countermeasures by government troops on American campuses, an unprecedented spread of drugs in middle class student culture, the contraceptive pill and its consequent radicalisation of sexual activity among young adults, the proliferation of urban and rural communes, Jesus freaks, and the exotically clad followers of innumerable spiritual leaders. The continuous voice of dissent of folk singers and psychedelic acid rock stars daily played the radio waves. All this added up to a generations' drastic loss of faith in the teachings or relevance of traditional institutions. Chief among the losers were the churches and synagogues.

Perhaps most directly threatening to established traditions was the proliferation of new religious movements, especially Eastern influenced ones, which promised immediate rewards of a type that were not associated with the traditional denominations. Bliss and tranquillity, health and purity, and more importantly, a life removed from the competitive and conventional realities of school, jobs, and raising a family were eagerly adopted by the 'new youth'.

There is little doubt that the religious triumvirate was decidedly shaken by the challenges of the 60s, which in fact did not ease, but grew more formidable as the decade wore on into the 70s, when political protest largely melted into religious experimentation. The solid values of hard work, education, and family life, on which the three religious communities were established, seem to have few takers among the young.

In the 1960s and the 1970s the conservative values shared by the three traditions were distinctive for their *community* rather than their difference, particularly as they were thrown into high relief by the counterculture's advocacy of a host of anti-traditional values. One might say that the three distinct traditions enjoyed a defacto solidarity against the excesses of the prevailing popular trends. And ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue were the vehicles and expression of that solidarity.

Certainly, these noble efforts did not simply emerge from negative sources of pressure. There is far more that is involved when religious traditions join in conversation and mutual edification than building up bulwarks against perceived threats. Universals among the traditions are sought - and are often found in the realm of ethical principles. The realisation that the differences of traditions do not necessarily remove them from God's compassion and grace, is a central theological theme, and indeed, the very foundation of inter-faith dialogue.

In this sense, the religious tumult of the 60s and 70s did not figure as an entirely negative impetus. Religious Studies and Jewish Studies were flourishing, often surpassing the rate of growth experienced by the university generally. In the field of New Testament studies, as in-

creasingly penetrating study of the Jewish origins and context of Christianity was making itself felt. Jewish university studies also were proceeding apace and research into the multiplicity of Jewish sects in late antiquity, for example, was broadening the self-understanding of Judaism.

It was important to the cause of ecumenism that these scholarly developments were occurring in the 60s and early 70s. For although the time was ripe for

such reforms, scholarship provided the knowledge and understanding necessary for the theological refinement of doctrine. (Space does not permit me here to draw a comparison with the scholarship of the across traditions). In multicultural Australia, where prejudice and ignorance about religion is prevalent, there was never a more appropriate time to pursue the serious study of Judaism and Christianity, as well as other traditions, in order to foster improved inter-faith relations.

