

Standing Committee – Report 2004

APPENDIX R

“Walking Far, Walking Together”

Central Committee of World Council of Churches 2003

A reflection from Archbishop John Neill

Coming from Kenya, Dr. Samuel Kobia, was elected at the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches as the next General Secretary (Chief Executive Officer) in place of Dr. Konrad Raiser, who has led the Council for eleven years. Sam is in his mid-fifties, a Methodist Minister, married to Ruth with four children. He grew up looking after cattle and goats before starting his education. He has long ecumenical experience at both national and world levels. Recently he published a book ‘Courage to Hope’, which brings together many years of work coming to terms with the dilemmas of Africa. In it he fosters the conviction that Africa has the moral and spiritual resources for shaping a future that will provide life with dignity for all its peoples. He offered an African proverb to the Council on two occasions and it was quoted frequently throughout the meeting – “If you want to walk fast, travel alone. If you want to walk far, travel together”. This seems a very timely reminder for all our Churches in a fast changing society.

A WORKING COMMITTEE

Representing the Church of Ireland, and also nominated by the Methodist Church, it has been a privilege for me to serve two terms (14 years) coming to an end in 2006, on this Committee of one hundred and twenty members, which meet (usually now in Geneva) every year or eighteen months. The eight-day meeting has evolved a very effective method of working. The first period is devoted to plenary presentations of major issues or areas of work, often requested at a previous meeting, or otherwise through the international ecumenical networks. In these opening days, members from each continent meet together separately to reflect on the way in which they are hearing their own concerns or reacting to what others are saying. Likewise regions (such as Britain and Ireland or Eastern Europe) and denominational groupings meet to both reflect and raise particular issues. Just to ensure that we really do work from 0830 to 2200, there are further ‘hearings’ on particular areas of concern which are not among the main themes that particular year!

The next period involves the members being divided into four or five groups meeting with consultants and staff members. Each committee is given a particular mandate, usually two or three of the major issues or presentations, but is also given the chance to reflect on virtually everything that has occurred and to feed it back to the committee that holds that specific mandate. I serve on Policy Reference Committee II and we are instructed to identify issues of ecumenical significance emerging from the reports of the Moderator, General Secretary and Officers, and from thematic plenaries, regional meetings and hearings. We worked through most of three days in preparing a ten-page response for the whole Central Committee, which I presented on the last day.

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The final phase of the meeting is when we meet for one and a half days in Plenary to reflect on what each Committee has said, and more significantly to identify and decide the priorities and direction, of the World Council for the next phase of its work.

SPECIAL PRESENTATIONS

The plenary presentations this year were on Youth Ministry, People with Handicaps, Genetic engineering and the particular concerns of the peoples of Latin America, as the 2006 Assembly will be held in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Each presentation was moving and effective but the most memorable was that on people with handicaps. This was led by a blind person from Africa and by a Swedish pastor who has very severe speech difficulties and other physical handicaps. It reminded me that we so often think we are including people with handicaps when we build ramps, but how seldom we realise that God gives them particular gifts to enrich the life and ministry of the Church. In the presentation on Genetic Engineering, there was a clear call for ecumenical co-ordination of the various Church responses to a fast-developing science that raises huge issues for our understanding of the unique and God-given value of each person. The United Methodist Church (USA) and several churches in Polynesia have done work on this subject, particularly as indigenous peoples and indeed racial minorities seem particular targets of much genetic research. This gives grounds for the fear in some places that some research could be more about selective breeding than anything else. This conclusion was not reached but the fact that such fears are about makes it a matter for urgent concern for the Churches. Both these plenaries had a clear overall theme namely 'Caring for Life'.

INTERFAITH MATTERS

The most significant contribution of the whole meeting was the Moderator's report presented by His Holiness, Aram I, Armenian Patriarch of Lebanon. He opened up the whole subject of "Inter-Religious" dialogue in a manner that was very courageous for one who comes from a very conservative culture. He reminded us that "in many regions, the growing role of religion in public life is accompanied by considerable changes in the religious landscape. Religiously homogenous societies are being replaced by multi-religious societies". This rings many bells for us in Ireland today, particularly in the Republic. He concluded that in this situation "Inter-religious collaboration, undergirded by a serious theological dialogue, is imperative and urgent". He reminded us also that dialogue is no longer merely an academic activity. "People from all walks of life are engaged in a living dialogue. We are experiencing 'a dialogue of life'".

It was very clear that dialogue was not about syncretism, nor about letting go of that which is unique. Dialogue and mission should not be polarised. Further it was very clear that dialogue involved an immersion in one's own faith, but also a willingness to discover a richer understanding of that very faith through contact with another religion. I was made to reflect how those of us with a very intimate and informal approach to prayer could learn from the very solemn reverence for God Almighty found in the spirituality of Islam. In fact in this respect, Islam simply reflects a vital part of the Judaeo/Christian tradition of which we often lose sight.

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Reactions to the Moderator's Report were varied but generally very positive. It came out clearly that the reaction was often determined by the local context, especially with regard to different manifestations of Islam. It could be that different manifestations of Christianity might also be involved! One reaction in Policy Reference Committee II that spoke volumes came from Bishop Azaniah, former Moderator of the Church of Pakistan. He said that Christian/Muslim dialogue in Pakistan had taught two vital lessons "Islam is not Terrorism, Christianity is not Western". In each case a common perception was challenged and finally rejected.

SEXUALITY

The hearings on particular issues had each to take place at the same time, and people had to choose between about six or seven subjects. I chaired the hearing on human sexuality, which naturally attracted the largest single proportion in the current situation. Our purpose was not to discuss either sexuality in general nor same-sex relationships in particular, but to hear how this discussion might be furthered. We shared our own contexts and studies, we heard in particular the way in which a series of seminars at Bossey (WCC School of Ecumenics) had provided an opportunity to explore the issues without seeking to take up positions, and how recently both the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Lutheran World Federation was dealing with these issues. Several points emerged which I list as follows.

- (a) A safe space must be found for such discussions and this space is only safe if people are prepared to participate without their own agenda.
- (b) A safe space ceases to be safe if transferred to a legislative assembly.
- (c) This is a time when there is an urgency to begin the conversation, but not a time of urgency for conclusions.

ANGLICANS

The Anglican members of the Central Committee gathered and the current debate on sexuality nationally was quickly on the agenda! There is a general recognition that cultural context greatly affects a response to issues of sexuality. However, our group including members from Africa, America, Asia, Polynesia and these islands was united in a concern to be together and to offer our prayerful support to the Archbishop of Canterbury both in the forthcoming meeting of Primates and personally in a concern for him, his wife and family. We not only prayed for him, but also wrote to him to affirm his ministry and to share with him some of the positive experiences of recent discussions at Bossey.

The Future

The WCC faces many challenges in a changing Ecumenical scene and there is much talk of "Reconfiguration" of the Ecumenical movement. This discussion is bound to continue through to the Brazil Assembly in 2006. There are severe financial problems caused in

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no small part by the fact that European Churches can no longer carry the immense burdens that they used to bear. The situation is under control but there have been many painful cutbacks.

The Central Committee said its farewell to the Reverend Dr. Konrad Raiser who had served as General Secretary for eleven years. In that period he has paid official visits to Churches in eighty countries! The weight of his theological expertise and administrative ability has well served the WCC. The next Central Committee will be intrigued to see how the atmosphere will change or otherwise under the leadership of a Kenyan Methodist minister taking the place of a German Lutheran Professor! Meanwhile thoughts are already turning towards 2006 and the Assembly of WCC in Brazil with the prayerful theme “God in your mercy, transform the World”.