

Standing Committee – Report 2005

APPENDIX S

"God in your Grace, Transform the World"

Central Committee of World Council of Churches 2005

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Three themes, the forthcoming Assembly, consensus decision-making and the changing ecumenical landscape dominated this year's Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.

ASSEMBLY 2006

The 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches will be held next February in Porto Alegre in Brazil. It will be smaller than that held in Harare in 1998, and it will last ten days, the shortest ever. So far participants listed from Ireland include, the Bishop of Cashel, Ms Yvonne Naylor and the Reverend Daniel Nuzum from the Church of Ireland and the Reverend Dr Heather Morris of the Methodist Church. The theme is both a prayer and a challenge, reflecting serious concerns of the Churches in Latin America – "God in your Grace, Transform the World".

At the Central Committee, the Moderator, His Holiness Aram I from the Armenian Orthodox Church in Lebanon delivered the opening address. He chose his subject in line with the forthcoming Assembly theme "Rediscovering the Church's Ministry of Healing".

In a magisterial way he spoke of the need to recognise healing as including the prophetic witness of the Church – so much so that the Church loses its identity and credibility "if it does not understand itself as God's healing community and agent, committed to His transforming empowering and reconciling mission in the power of the Holy Spirit." In the context of any aspect of a healing ministry, he drew a sharp and timely contrast between power as a dominating force and power as a liberating force.

CONSENSUS

World Council of Churches Assemblies and Committees in their working methods have tended to reflect the quasi-parliamentary type of decision-making, familiar in many Western member churches. This has often alienated Orthodox Churches and others from the East and indeed most of those from the Southern Hemisphere whether of Orthodox or Western traditions.

A process of "Consensus" decision-making was initiated this year. My fear was that this might mean that there could be no change without unanimity – but in fact it was all about a more consultative way of working, the framing of proposals as the conversation developed, and what amounted to 'straw polls', with often a vote only at the very end. In fact it was probably what we seek to achieve in the Church of Ireland most of the time,

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other than when we are dealing with legislative and financial matters at a Diocesan or General Synod level. The lack of strict rules of debate (and no amendments worded in precise detail) was excellent in groupings of forty or fifty people, but possibly showed strains at the level of the whole Central Committee, which is about twice that number. The need for good humour in the chair was emphasised!

ECUMENICAL LANDSCAPE

Sam Kobia, the General Secretary of WCC has been in office just over a year and has travelled to six different regions of the world to discover the concerns of the worldwide church. In a remarkable analysis, he pointed to six general features.

- A mood of anxiety and insecurity in a world of violence.
- A search for a sense of identity especially in the awareness of interfaith issues.
- A change in the centre of gravity, not simply from North to South, but from denominational Christianity to the "informal sector" and spirituality not linked to traditional structures.
- A fear that patterns of migration are leaving many people very vulnerable.
- A concern over the willingness to confront North / South economic issues.
- The damage done by the confrontation between the West and the Arab world focussing on Iraq.

The issue of the change in the centre of gravity from the traditional Churches to newer types of Christian belonging is of course, a challenge for each of the member Churches. The world scene is changing. Due to the massive growth of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church, though remaining the largest single Church is no longer the majority in the Church universal. Ecumenical structures have not really made an impact on the newer Churches, though there are moves in both directions. The result is that the World Council of Churches is going to face increasing challenges in the future and these discussions were never far from the agenda at this year's meeting.

The ecumenical movement is a movement rather than a structure, but yet that movement requires some 'architecture' if it is to be an effective force in speaking to the structures of power in today's world, be that power in the media, the market-place or the parliamentary debate. The same issues confront our Irish and British ecumenical instruments. This wider discussion will be a matter for further exploration at Porto Alegre next year.

TWO OTHER IMPORTANT ISSUES

There was an effective plenary presentation by the Churches of the Pacific region moderated by Bishop Jabez Bryce, Anglican Bishop in Polynesia. One of the most startling aspects of this was to listen to speakers tell of how their own island homes were fast disappearing under the sea through global warming. The average height above sea level of many of the Pacific islands is about two metres (cf. the Netherlands – nine metres). We adopted (by consensus!) a motion reminding us of 'the threat of human – induced climate change to lives, livelihoods, societies, cultures and eco–systems of the

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Pacific Islands' which asked us 'to take responsibility for the ecological damage that we have caused, by paying for the costs of adaptation' to other ways of operating in the industrialised world. This puts in perspective the urgency for Ireland to become compliant with the Kyoto Accord, which came into force actually during the Central Committee.

The other main issue was a hearing on human sexuality. Most people dreaded the debate, especially the Anglicans who were weary of it; though we went on to discuss it once again at our Anglican meeting that evening! However, the hearing was successful, because it was precisely that. It was not a debate; there was no decision to be reached, but people contributed calmly and from their own culture. The major contributions were well thought out and it was perhaps a pointer at what could be done at a more local level. There was a fascinating analysis of the material sent in by member churches following a request from WCC. Among the features noted was a Western dominance of churches responding, a clear contrast in anthropology between Orthodox and Protestant positions, a strong Biblical foundation but with a variety of interpretative methods and a definite shift from negative and Augustinian attitudes to sexuality. However, it was also stated that there seemed to be a significant gap between the issues addressed by the Churches and the real world in which we live, and the Church statements themselves showed signs of hardening. A clear call for a pastoral approval came through this presentation.

Many other issues occupied this eight-day meeting and as usual it was a meeting dominated less by administrative matters, and more by meeting a group representative of so many of the world's Churches and their leadership, sharing in discussion, prayer and Bible Study, and learning much together.

I have been privileged to represent the Church of Ireland for about twelve years on the Committee and consider it to be the best 'in-service' training that could be offered to a bishop or any other Church leader. In 2006 a new Central Committee will be elected in Brazil and there has been an informal agreement with the Methodist Church that it is their turn if only one person from Ireland is to be elected. However, I hope that as I have completed my full entitlement of being twice elected that there will nonetheless be a second Irish member and that the Church of Ireland will nominate one of its delegates, as well as pledging full support for a Methodist member. The late Canon Eric Elliott and Bishop Brian Hannon were each significant contributors to ecumenism at the international level and it is a tradition that this Church should continue.

† John Dublin:
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