

JESUS CHRIST - THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

A report of the Sixth Assembly of World Council of Churches, Vancouver '83

"We are different, but there is no division" said Marie Assaad at the end of a three day pre-assembly women's meeting. Most of the 300 women delegates, who were officially representing their churches at the 6th Assembly attended the women's meeting. Women were one-third of the total number of delegates, which was the highest ever quota of women at a major decision-making church meeting.

We came from a wide range of Christian faiths and cultural backgrounds, and only some were involved in the ministry or were part of established church hierarchies. Most of us were laywomen chosen to represent our churches, and most of us were at the Assembly for the first time.

The Women's meeting had been planned to help women find their identity both as individuals and as a group in an overwhelming crowd of delegates. We were not there to make major statements or policy decisions.

We studied "Birth" and "Living Stones" from Images of Life, the bible study used in preparation for the Assembly. We discussed the eight Assembly issues in small groups and compiled our findings. Through our participation in Issue Groups at the Assembly, the recommendations would be presented for inclusion in final reports.

Some recommendations and findings were:-

A study to be made on Culture and Faith (because culture is part of our identity and our faith)  
Churches to discuss the document "Community of Women and Men in the Church."  
Inter-denominational study of document "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry"  
(dialogue to include ordained & lay, men & women, youth & disabled)  
Churches to examine the ethics of modern technology and its dehumanizing effects.  
Challenge governments to convert military production into peace production.  
Women to make networks of solidarity. (What drugs etc. does Australia ship to third-world countries that are detrimental to human development?)  
To build a community in families, local regions and the wider world we must learn about ourselves - have a positive self-image, we must learn about others, including how to appreciate and accommodate the variety of gifts in the community and to give and receive.  
We must communicate the gospel.

We looked at the issues as women, but we were encouraged to participate in the Assembly as women in the whole.

Barbel von Wartenberg of the World Council Women's Desk asked, "How do the big issues of the world affect the lives of women? Think of your women at home, of their witness and service in the church, of their suffering and oppression in societies. It is in their name you hold your mandate at the Assembly. Who pays attention to the poor prostitute girls in Manila, Bangkok and elsewhere, easy victims of militarism and tourism? Who speaks about the sexual abuse of helpless domestic servants or women political prisoners or battered wives and children, or cheap labor of women? What is the share of women in raising and distributing the resources of the churches? We observe with great concern that in the time of budget cutting it is often the women and youth programs that suffer first. How many women have a chance to formulate their questions when it comes to the negotiations on church unity? Are the pioneering ecumenical women's organizations taken seriously and do they participate in this? And on the peace and disarmament questions: Women are among the most active ones in the peoples movements against the arms race. Do they have a voice in the negotiations and peace research? What is our responsibility for the future generations? How can women encourage each other to involve themselves more on questions of peace and justice, not leave it in the hands of a few power leaders? I hope women will raise their voices clearly and sharply."

We spent those three days in worship and discussion, in joy and sorrow, as we looked at what Jesus Christ means to the life of the world and what Jesus Christ means to the lives of women.

It was from this point that I was able to move into the Assembly. I now had some understanding of the issues and how to handle them in that Assembly. I had also experienced the community of the ecumenical family.

It was fitting that the opening service was in the Yellow and White striped Tent, which became the focal point of the Assembly and tied together the events of the next 18 days - but above all, reminded us of our humanness in the presence of Jesus Christ, The life of the World.

Over 3,000 delegates, visitors, media representatives and observers met in The Tent for worship. There was singing, drumming, music and prayers in six languages. Symbols of God's gift of life from various cultures were brought to the altar. An African woman handed her small baby to the tall Dr. Philip Potter, who gently cradles the child in his arms. The act captured our hearts and brought tears to the eyes of many of us.

Earlier in the day 15 Native Canadians symbolized their participation through the lighting of a ceremonial fire. This fire burned continually during the assembly and was used as a source for candles lit during worship services. The Native Canadians also presented a Totem Pole to the W.C.C. which was raised at the University and later was to be shipped to Geneva. A totem pole is symbolic of the history of Native people. "We searched our minds and hearts for one of the greatest gifts we could give," a Native Canadian told us, "What we have to offer while you are hear is little, but it is all that we have to give."

On Sunday afternoon, while 50 demonstrators picketed and passed out leaflets, nearly 12,000 people from the region joined 3,000 assembly participants in a two hour service and pageant tracing the scriptural basis of Christian faith. Scripture, from creation through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection to the promise of the Holy City, was interpreted through readings, liturgical dance and music from a 750-voice choir, as well as a brass and percussion ensemble.

Jean Vanier, the Canadian founder of L'Arche Homes for the mentally handicapped was the speaker. He said, "Jesus is calling us to make community with the littlest, the weakest and the lost of the world."

The theme, "Jesus Christ - the life of the world" and subthemes were presented in plenary sessions. A North American Eastern Orthodox theologian said, "Jesus Christ - The life of the world is a call to Christians for radical repentance, spiritual renewal, urgency on the walk toward unity, common witness, prophetic action, being ready to die for others in Christ's name".

We were warned by Allan Boesak, South African Reformed Theologian, that the anti-nuclear movement might lead to an "ideology of oppression" peace may become "primarily a North Atlantic concern" while deprivation and injustice, especially in Third-world countries, are ignored.

Life a Gift of God - A nuclear scientist said that every scientific advance brings both new threats and possibilities. We have an immense task before us if we are to harness the true power of science and technology to keep the world in peace, to feed the hungry and heal the sick.

Life confronting and overcoming death - A South Korean church leader once imprisoned for his protests, a Czech theologian sharing her experience of living through two world wars, the wife of a Bolivian tin miner, A Ugandan bishop exiled from his country during Idi Amin's rule and an anti-nuclear war physician all spoke on this theme. Hyung Kyu Park said, "We want to die in freedom rather than to live under the nuclear umbrella." Helen Caldicott graphically described the effects of a nuclear bomb and then said, "Unless we can break the cycle of corporate greed manifested by the role of armaments of death, the future of the planet is in gross jeopardy."

Life in its Fullness - West German theologian Dorothee Soelle told us that material wealth cannot coexist with the fullness of life.

We were encouraged to make a clear stand for peace, justice and participation. During his report as General Secretary, Dr. Philip Potter said, "The world will be watching us to know whether we will meet the test of being truly a house of living stones, built on the rock of faith in God who wills peace for all, and the rights of all

to be fully themselves whatever their creed or sex or race or class or nation."

We met in The Tent each morning for worship. This was our start for the day's work. Music, Readings from the Word, Prayers of Confession and Intercession, Singing and Meditation - all presented in different languages.

One highlight was the Eucharist, celebrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie. He was assisted by 6 clergy from other traditions and from other parts of the world, including two women.

We solemnly and joyfully celebrated the "Feast of Life" using a liturgy first used in Lima, Peru at a meeting of the Faith and Order Commission of W.C.C. We sang in English, to a melody composed by an Argentinian, "Your death, Lord Jesus we proclaim,  
Your resurrection we celebrate,  
Your coming in glory, we await."

The choral and instrumental music came from many places including Taiwan, India, Sweden, Cameroon, Canada, Romania, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and France. Some of the hymns were old ones, words familiar to all, but much of the words and music was new to many of us, but we sang with vigor and with confidence.

65 teams of two from around the world, took the Bread and Wine for distribution to various parts of the tent. Ceramic cups, plates and jugs were handmade by a local potter. I was chosen to be one of twelve who processed with Symbols of Life - candles, bread, wine, flowers and shrubs - to the altar, also to be one of the distributors. My teammate was a Mennonite from Amsterdam.

Unity, diversity, sharing and participation marked the "Feast of Life". The Lord's Prayer was recited by each of us in our mother tongue, as well as many other responses. One comment was heard, "Truly, this is speaking in tongues."

There was magnificent pageantry, orderly confusion, precise ritual, spontaneous prayers, and running through it all the obvious awareness of the Holy Spirit. Truly it a "a day that the Lord had made."

We spent most of the second week looking deeply into the Issues. Eight masked figures drew applause and laughter as they dramatized the issues. Wearing larger-than-life masks and appropriate costumes, they portrayed emotions ranging from boredom with ecclesiastical speech-making to joy at being part of the church assembly. The eight issues were witnessing, unity, participation, healing, peace, justice, learning and communicating.

We were urged to enter vigorously into the issue group discussions, and we did. Almost since the Assembly began, each of us had been part of one of some 60 small groups for discussion and Bible Study. These in turn formed eight cluster groups to share our experiences. Finally the fruits of the cluster groups were brought to the entire assembly. Parallel to this, we each selected one of the eight issues and then held sessions on those topics and sub-topics. These groups summarized their concerns in the form of resolutions for the full assembly. During one of the plenary sessions for reporting results of small and cluster groups, Church of England delegate Ruth Etchells said her cluster solved the tensions between approaching the issues both vertically and horizontally in six words: Christ resolves conflict; Christ activates change. A theological reflection was given by one, "Jesus said you don't live by bread alone, but he never said that to a hungry person. You never find Christ acting only as a pastoral counselor; he usually did something." Some concerns voiced were: the problem of hunger, the caste system in India, the Armenian question, the Ku Klux Klan, the disabled, the role of "worldwide Christian communions" in the WCC, participation of women and youth both in WCC and in the churches, and ordination of women. It was suggested regarding solving problems, that we must get under peoples skin and not impose a philosophy which we don't understand anyway. We should approach more problems through careful listening.

Elections were held for seven WCC presidents and the Central Committee. This is where I observed people struggling for power. Strong protests were voiced by the youth, Middle East protestants, delegates from Latin countries of Europe when nominations for 145 candidates were presented.

With 13% of youth delegates, they wanted 13% of Central Committee to be youth. Orthodox had been granted 23% and when the struggle for power was taking place, they demanded their 23%. Women wanted 30% representation and the voice of the disabled will be heard next time wanting their percentage, not to mention the ratio of ordained and lay.

A Vancouver Japanese drum group opened a series of assembly peace events on Friday 5th July. Approx. 3,500 people were there for the public witness for peace and justice on the eve of the 38th Hiroshima Day. Children released balloons, brightly colored banners, mauve German peace scarves, words and singing made up the impressive ceremony held in a grove of totem poles behind the university's anthropology museum.

After the children released the balloons to float high into the sky, Dr. Philip Potter commented, "The children are demonstrating how our destiny is to grow together rather than go down in destruction. Many speakers witnessed in their own language: a French-speaking Pacific Islander, a Japanese Buddhist, a German, a Russian, a Middle Easterner, a Latin American and a Native Canadian. After the last song was sung, most of us paraded over to the worship tent for a worship service and peace vigil.

Bishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa spoke at the peace vigil. "If you do not believe in the power of prayer, take it from me that the age of miracles has not ceased... after all, I'm here aren't I. We in South Africa, who have had a few problems to handle, have been upheld wonderfully by your tremendous prayers."

The Canadians took us on a "Voyage" with a trunk full of Canadian State and church history.

The Pacific Islanders in their traditional dress sang their regional songs and presented delegates with leis. They are working together through Pacific Conference of Churches. A Pacific theology relevant to their culture is emerging. They are looking to their history, their culture, as well as the Gospel for their measuring rod. Before, they said, the gospel was foreign and western. Now it is relevant and meaningful. A coconut was used to illustrate this new theology - movement in the making. "Bread and wine come from two different plants, but from the coconut both are from the same plant, just as Jesus Christ offered His body and shed His blood from himself."

Representatives from five world religions were invited to speak on "Life, a Gift of God." Islamic teachings, explained in Russian, said life is the creation of the Almighty Allah, and is the greatest gift of God. Buddhism affirms the sanctity of life. Their goal is to free all living beings from the series of life, so they may attain the "joy of peace." Hindu scriptures affirmed "Whatever there is in creation is the Lord." God is truth, consciousness, bliss. Each of us therefore partakes in this manifestation of God. Rabbi Tanenbaum said, "Jews and Christians are bound together by the affirmation of the value of every human being as a child of God, deserving nurture and respect, the millions of Jews will join hands with you in the cause of God's human family."

Many Evangelicals from all over the world were present and they made a statement about the Assembly. Other statements were made on Human Rights, Central America, Afghanistan, Cyprus, South Africa, International Food Disorder, The Middle East, Peace and Justice (There can be no peace without justice, no justice without peace) and the Youth brought a statement to the World Council of Churches.

There were resolutions on The Pacific, and The Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada. Public issues of continuing concern to the World Council of Churches were the Armenian Genocide, U.S. Military bases in the Phillipines, the situation in Sri Lanka and Lesotho.

Two new churches were given full membership. They were the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of South Africa.

The Canadian people worked tremendously hard for the Assembly. Gifts were made, such as a Tote Bag to carry all our daily paraphernalia including our Worship book, Work book, papers presented on the day as well as those still to be dealt with, a set of headphones to help with all the languages spoken, a camera and lunch. Another important item we carried in our bag

Another important item we carried in our bag was a cushion. Over 3,000 tote bags and cushions were made to make our stay more comfortable.

We left before the Assembly had finished. They still had approx. six papers to discuss in the last four hours before the Closing Worship.

There is a message from the 6th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The last paragraph reads,

Life is given. We receive God's gift of constant thankfulness. At the Assembly's opening worship a mother held up her baby at the Lord's table. It was a sign of hope and of continuity of life. Sometimes we are almost overcome by the smallness and insignificance of our lives; then we feel helpless. But as we feed upon the bread of life in worship we know again and again God's saving act in Christ in our own lives. We are astounded and surprised that the eternal purpose of God is persistently entrusted to ordinary people. That is the risk God takes. The forces of death are strong. The gift of life in Christ is stronger. We commit ourselves to live that life, with all its risks and joys, and therefore dare to cry, with all the host of heaven, 'O death, where is your victory?' Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Helen Banks (Mrs)  
18.8.83

Presidents - World Council of Churches - 1983 - 1990.

Most Rev. W.P.K. Makhulu	Church of the Province of Central Africa Botswana
Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios	Orthodox Syrian Church of the East India
Dame R. Nita Barrow	Methodist Church Barbados
Bishop Johannes Hempel	Bund Evangelischer Kirchen in der DDR (BEK) German Democratic Republic
Dr. Marga Buehrig	Swiss Reformed Church Switzerland
Dr. Lois Wilson	United Church of Canada Canada
Patriarch Ignatios	Greek Orth. Patr. of Antioch and All the East Syria