

Reflections on Canberra 1991

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Twelve months on from the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra it is still difficult to present a cohesive evaluation from the kaleidoscope of memories, observations and assessments. A firm conclusion reached at one stage in the two-week meeting is modified by a later development or subsequent reading of reports. The scale of the proceedings, the size of the multitude, the diversity of language, culture and ecclesiastical tradition all contribute to a feeling like that of a combatant in a great battle. One's own efforts seem to have very limited significance. The ebb and flow of the battle may only dimly be perceived and the struggle elsewhere in the field is only heard of sometime afterwards.

A WCC Assembly has a very different atmosphere from an Anglican Communion gathering, whether of the Anglican Consultative Council, in total of around a hundred persons, or of the much larger Lambeth Conference. These meetings reflect a wide range of cultures, races and languages in the Communion, but there is a vivid sense of family belonging, a distinctive ethos shaped by a shared history and tradition of worship, and many participants are known to one another. At Canberra there could be up to 4,000 people, delegates, observers, consultants, secretaries, stewards, visitors, congregating at one time. An Assembly affords a richness of Christian tradition, life and understanding unmatched by any other institution. It is possible to get a foretaste of the ultimate realisation of the Kingdom when 'the greatness and the wealth of the nations will be brought into the city' (Rev. 21:26). But the vastness of the crowd and limitation of the time mean that distorted perceptions concerning Christians of other traditions and cultures may not get corrected. Remarks made or stances adopted in public, or even in groups, create impressions which there is not time or opportunity to clear up in unhurried discussion.

I propose to attempt an evaluation of Canberra 1991 under three main headings, each signalling a crisis; a crisis of identity, a crisis of theology, and a crisis of representation. I would not, however, want the word crisis to be understood in simply negative terms, but rather in a more biblical sense of danger and opportunity, of judgement and divine challenge. The WCC needs to bear in mind at this stage in its history — moving towards its fiftieth anniversary — that 'judgement begins at the house of God', but also as a new world order is being shaped it has a glorious opportunity to be an instrument of God's purposes in the growth of his Kingdom of peace, righteousness, justice and love. The WCC was born in the context of the immediate post-war years. The present time presents a challenge no less urgent following the collapse of the Soviet Union, not even anticipated at Canberra, and in the growing gulf between the nations of the North and South.

Causes for thanksgiving

Before developing the thesis of the three crises it would only be right to testify to the outstanding benefits of the Assembly. That it could be held at all three weeks into the Gulf War, with all the disruption of air travel, international tensions and personal problems thus entailed, was remarkable in itself. Some delegates had great difficulty getting to Canberra. One Sudanese Christian only managed to get under way on a journey of several days after successive attempts to leave his country and beatings from fellow-countrymen. Perhaps Christians in the West do not realise what it means to brothers and sisters in some lands to be able to attend an international Church gathering.

Worship took place in an enormous 'canvas cathedral' with a capacity for 3,500 worshippers. Building on the widely-acclaimed quality of worship at Vancouver in 1983, liturgical resources and materials from the Church world-wide were combined to provide worship experience that was enriching and unifying, although inevitably not every aspect on every occasion pleased everyone. Many of the participants were inclined to draw a sharp contrast between the worship of the assembly and the frustrations and dissatisfactions of work in plenary sessions, the former being a celebration of faith and unity in Christ, the latter a babel of conflicting voices in badly managed debates.

Meeting with fellow-Christians whose lives and witness have to be conducted under intolerable strains of persecution, poverty and physical danger is a very humbling experience. From such contacts prayer is stimulated and informed, and those who return to their fires of affliction go with a deeper sense of fellowship in the body of Christ.

A significant part of an assembly comes with the application and admittance to membership of the WCC of new churches, this time taking the total to well over 300. But especially moving was the return of the 'post denominational' Protestant Church of China, the China Christian Council, after decades of isolation due to government policy. In the acceptance ceremony Bishop K. H. Ting, the CCC President, an Anglican bishop before the revolution, was embraced by the Rev. C. M. Kao, leader of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, as a sign of unity between two Chinese churches long kept apart by their respective regimes. Similarly, Christian leaders from North and South Korea publicly declared their unity in Christ and pledged themselves to work for unification of their country, divided for almost fifty years. Acts of reconciliation and unity, such as these between Chinese and Korean Christians, have added significance when witnessed by representatives of churches across the world.

Not least among the benefits of an Assembly is close encounter and fellowship with the churches of the host country. All that Australian Christians did to welcome and involve the Assembly in their own fellowship was done with great efficiency, warmth and joy. Many participants were given opportunity to experience the worship and life of local churches over a wide area of the country. With this brief summary of some of the undoubted benefits of Canberra 1991 I turn to attempt a critical overall assessment.

A crisis of identity

What is the WCC, and in particular an Assembly, for? Here we run into a major tension evident at Canberra, and since. Put briefly, is it an instrument for promoting greater unity among the churches of the world, or is it a forum for highlighting and striving to resolve issues of justice, peace and the survival of the planet, or is it both? There is no doubt that the former purpose filled the vision of the founding churches in 1948. And a substantial number of churches with representatives on the WCC structures and delegates to the Assembly expect it still to be the primary purpose.

The Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, themselves working towards full communion, and who together constitute a major bloc in the WCC membership, became so disturbed towards the end of the Assembly that they issued a joint statement. For them the Assembly had heightened a number of concerns that had been developing since Vancouver. They now wanted to emphasise that the main aim of the WCC must be 'the restoration of the unity of the Church'. Issues of faith and order which divide Christians must be solved, and so the work of the unit committed to that task needed to find a more prominent place in the various expressions of the WCC. In particular the Orthodox noted 'an increasing departure' from the basis of the WCC, which has provided a framework for their participation. They missed from many WCC documents 'the affirmation of Jesus Christ as the world's Saviour' specifically referring to inter-faith dialogue — and perceived a growing 'departure from biblically-based Christian understandings' of the Trinitarian God, salvation, the good news of the gospel, human beings as created in the image of God, and the Church. This concern for theological orthodoxy will be taken up again in the next section. The point at present is the Orthodox insistence on the search for the unity of the Church as the WCC's primary objective.

A moderate and constructive statement from 'participants who share Evangelical perspectives', issued in the final days of the Assembly, also included in its submissions an emphasis on 'the call for Christian unity which the WCC has had as its vocation'. This was accompanied by a recognition that presently there is insufficient commitment to ecumenical activity by evangelicals in member churches of the WCC and in other churches.

It is abundantly clear, however, that a WCC Assembly is the best Christian forum in the world for highlighting and seeking remedies for issues of justice, peace and the environment. A Christian delegation from a country suffering appalling poverty as a result of the burdens of international debt will passionately seek the help of fellow Christians, especially in the richer nations where a solution could be found. Indigenous peoples robbed of the lands of their ancestors, oppressed for decades and even centuries by invading cultures, still striving for a fair exercise of power over their own affairs, want their cry to be heard in an Assembly. Women, still treated as second-class citizens and exploited in many cultures, and also in some churches, now want to give expression to their aspirations for full partnership with men.

I recall one distinguished woman delegate from a church in the Indian

sub-continent highly educated and gifted, who cannot vote on any issue in her own local church. Communities, whose structures and economy have been based successfully for centuries on a local fishing industry, for instance, now see it being destroyed by modern fishing fleets from powerful nations. Or, small communities in the Pacific watch the dumping of nuclear waste and poisonous chemicals in their area and greatly fear for their survival. What better forum to stimulate the Christian conscience than a WCC Assembly? And then there are the increasing numbers of Christians waking up to the perils facing the planet through pollution, ecological disturbance, famine and abuse of resources.

The Vancouver Assembly called for urgent attention to Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation issues, and the relevant departments of the WCC worked away on them, leading up to the World Convocation under that title in Seoul, Korea, in 1990. It was inevitable and right, therefore, that Canberra would focus on these issues. As the final Report of the Seventh Assembly reminds us, of the 4.5 billion years our planet has existed there has been life for 3.4 billion years. The human race, however, may go back only 80,000 years — 'a twinkling of the Creator's eye'. Yet, in only about the last 200 years have we begun 'to threaten the very foundations of life on our planet'. It has been strongly argued that as yet neither the WCC, nor any of its churches, has fashioned an adequate theology to undergird debate and action on JPIC issues. But of the urgent necessity for Christians to face these matters in their corporate assemblies, and with all people of goodwill, there can be no doubt.

The problem is to avoid blanket judgements and simplistic solutions. Rhetoric and passion abound, but informed expertise is scarce and finds little scope for expression, particularly in plenary debates with severe limitations on length of speeches. Understandably, the Gulf War occasioned highly emotional debates. The cry of the majority of delegates, urged on vociferously by visitors, was for an immediate and unconditional cease fire. The war was deemed 'neither holy nor just'. An attempt in an amendment by most Church of England delegates, and others, to make Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait a precondition was not only defeated but castigated. With hindsight, and bearing in mind all that has happened subsequently — to the Kurds, to other opponents of the Hussein regime, in discovery of nuclear potential, etc. — the majority view at Canberra may well be thought simplistic.

The War debate was a notable example of how attitudes to public issues that crop up at a WCC Assembly are shaped by the cultures from which the delegates come. Many American Christians had uneasy consciences because of a succession of military involvements in Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, and other central American struggles; so the Gulf War was another deplorable use of American power. Third World delegates were inclined to see the War as an imposition by powerful Western capitalism on a smaller, poorer country. British reaction, with a long memory of resistance to aggression, especially against Hitler, was dominated by the need to stop a dictator subduing a neighbour state. Of course, the public issues that arise are matters of good and evil, justice and injustice, and all who know the Church to be a sign, instrument and earnest of God's Kingdom must contribute to

the Church's prophetic witness. But the complexity of the issues in all their ramifications demands not only a clear voice but sound and informed judgement.

In an interview recorded in the WCC's magazine *One World* (August/September 1991) Dr Emilio Castro, the General Secretary, was asked whether the WCC was not so diverse that it cannot speak coherently any more, not just on public issues, and was losing the concern for a specific Christian theological basis to what it says and does. In reply he pointed to Canberra's theme as 'clearly Trinitarian, its worship fully Trinitarian and based on a common affirmation of the Christian faith, and its official Assembly documents as being rooted in a clear Trinitarian understanding and biblical authority'. But he also recognised the diversity in and across the churches, and the need to inculturate the gospel in the soil of people's conscience, 'which is part of our Christian obedience on the model of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ'. The inculturation of the gospel is a matter to which we will return. For the moment it is enough to point out that from attempts to inculturate the gospel arises much of the diversity in both public issues and theology apparent at Canberra which alarmed the Orthodox Churches and many others, and to which Dr Castro's answers are not entirely satisfactory.

That brings us back to the concern expressed by the Orthodox for a more coherent theology, asked for at Vancouver 1983, to undergird the search for Church unity. Many delegates would be ready to regard a WCC Assembly both as an instrument for promoting greater unity among the Churches, for which more attention to concerns of Faith and Order is essential, and a forum for issues of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. But the balance at Canberra was wrong, they would add, at any rate for most of the time.

As the Assembly drew to a close, however, the work done in the four Sections emerged. From the Section majoring on unity came an amended form of a statement asked for by the Central Committee in 1987 from the Faith and Order unit. Entitled 'The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling' it provided reassurance for many delegates. Its biblical basis could not be faulted. It described the unity to which we are called 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; a common mission witnessing to all people to the gospel of God's grace and serving the whole of creation. Building on the progress achieved in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* it called all churches to implement the objectives therein set out.

Further encouragement came when the Central Committee appointed at Canberra met in Geneva in September 1991. Its most important item, arising out of the Canberra Assembly, was a restructuring of the Council under four units: Unit I on Unity and Renewal, Unit II on Mission, Education and Witness, Unit III on Justice, Peace and Creation, and Unit IV on Sharing and Service. The concerns of Faith and Order are incorporated under Unit I. Dr Mary Tanner is Moderator of the Faith and Order section and deserves the prayer support of all, especially fellow-Anglicans. In the extensive debate on the restructuring a number of members insisted that the biblical and theo-

logical basis undergirding all the work undertaken by each of the programme units be made explicit. An amendment to that effect by the Church of Ireland Bishop of Clogher (Brian Hannon) 'in order to reassure our member Churches', was carried unanimously.

A crisis of theology

Sufficient has been said in general about the anxieties and demands at Canberra for greater attention to the search for a coherent theology. It is now time to be more specific and highlight some of the areas of dispute that emerged in the Assembly. Theological convictions were indeed diverse, but undue simplifications in assessing them must be avoided. It would, for instance, be untrue to interpret the arguments as a clash between theologies of the older churches and the younger, between the North and the South, although that interpretation has been tendered. The widely-publicised presentation by the young woman professor from Korea, Chung Hyun Kyung, received some of its severest criticism on theological grounds from Christians of Asia and the Pacific. Indeed, in so far as she had spent some time in North American theological circles caution is necessary in assuming her contribution and opposition to it constituted a tension between First and Third World theologies. Different methodologies were operating. It may be nearer the truth to speak of a clash between classic and contextual theologies, if by the former is meant a theology systematically worked out in cloistered institutions in the light of inherited traditions, and by the latter, theological judgements on current issues. But even that assessment needs qualifications. There is no one classic theology, and even an associated methodology may have to develop in reaction to new crises — witness the theologies of reformation times. Contextual theologies, though at risk of becoming impassioned reactions to evil situations supported by biblical texts taken out of context, may yet be undergirded by principles of Christian doctrine. Recognising that there are different ways of doing theology Christians from all traditions and cultures must be prepared to listen to one another and work towards greater understanding and coherence. For centuries it has been the churches of the North — and mostly men at that — that have shaped theology. The context is now the churches of the world, and the WCC is a meeting point.

Inculturation of the gospel

The inculturation of the gospel was the context in which theological contention at Canberra mainly focused. In all ages and among all peoples the gospel must engage with, and be expressed in a culture. It was so throughout biblical history and has been ever since. The key question, however, is the nature of the impact, and that must be regarded as including affirming, judging, redeeming effects. Christ affirms what is good in any culture; the diversity and benefits of cultures are part of God's manifold provision for the life of humankind. But Christ judges whatever in any culture is contrary to the life of God's kingdom, and offers his redeeming grace.

The older churches, in taking the gospel and building the Church in other lands, have been guilty of recklessly undermining indigenous cultures, and

imposing their own home cultures as though they were essential to full Christian life. Late in the day we have recognised this, and the younger churches have also woken to it with a sense of grievance and resentment. In compensation, considerable stress is now being placed on the integrity of all indigenous cultures. This understandable reaction has, however, its own danger; a failure to recognise the judgement element in the gospel. Not every aspect of any culture can be affirmed by Christ. Western cultures long steeped in the Christian tradition deserve his judgement as well as those to whom the gospel has lately come, even if Western Christians are slow to accept it.

In Canberra many delegates from both older and younger churches were disturbed at an uncritical acceptance of the 'spiritualities' of indigenous cultures in major presentations and documents. This seemed to be inculturation of the gospel run riot. The overall theme of the Assembly was the renewal of the Holy Spirit, and so some were prepared to draw in anything 'spiritual' from ancient cultures. The area of the world where the Assembly was held clearly stimulated this trend. Many cultures in East Asia and the Pacific are traditionally animist. In Australia no one could fail to acknowledge the aboriginal claims for justice and redress of two centuries of appalling treatment, or be unaware that this people had a spirituality going back 4,000 years. But it is one thing for Christians to repent of evils done to indigenous peoples; it is quite another to try to incorporate uncritically aspects of the spirituality of their ancient cultures.

How is the true activity of the Holy Spirit to be discerned in the world? That was the question raised by the contentious presentation of the young Korean professor already mentioned. She began with an invocation of the spirits of an eclectic collection of martyrs from biblical times to the students of Tian-an-men Square, of the spirits of Earth, Air and Water (now being polluted) and 'of our brother Jesus, tortured and killed on the cross'. Her own land was one of 'spirits full of Han (anguish of those who have died with their misery unappeased)'. And she spoke of these ancestors' spirits 'here with us' as 'icons of the Holy Spirit'. What basis in Christian theology could be adduced for this approach, which many roundly condemned as sheer syncretism? Apparently, certain Old Testament insights concerning the Spirit of God provided a jumping off ground. The Spirit is described as moving through all creation, brooding over it and working in his own way as and when he wills. And Jesus himself speaks of us not knowing whence he comes or whither he goes. But a full and balanced pneumatology must have at its heart the recognition that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, risen and glorified. In his farewell discourse in John's Gospel, Jesus makes clear that the Spirit's leading of the Church 'into all the truth' will relate directly to the revelation of the Father through himself, the Son, and thus glorify his name. In passing, while there can be no quarrel with focusing an Assembly on the person and work of the Spirit — the first time in the history of the WCC — I felt at times that the Spirit's primary role of pointing to Christ was lost sight of. For example, the opening act of worship almost entirely 'Spirit-centred' lacked the balance a trinitarian theme would have offered.

If the work of the Holy Spirit is not seen as Christocentric the way is open for all manner of 'spiritual' insights to get associated, particularly when attempts are made to relate to other religions or spiritualities of ancient cultures. Syncretism, the charge levelled against the presentation of the Korean professor and some of the draft reports from the Sections, and even the ceremony of passing through the smoke of burning leaves in an Aboriginal act of purification, can easily follow. As one Orthodox bishop from Greece declared, 'Our criterion for discerning the spirits is Christ.... It is also necessary to stress the relation of the Spirit of truth with the Church. The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost transformed individuals into an apostolic community responsible for continuing the work of Christ, for making known the truth of God'. That was said within one Section in the drafting of its report. And, it must be stated, many delegates in their Sections succeeded in shaping reports more in accordance with biblical theology. So, for instance, the Section on the transforming and sanctifying work of the Spirit agreed to say, 'Not every spirit is of the Holy Spirit. The primary criterion for discerning the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ'.

Considering the concentration on the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the Assembly it was much to be deplored that pentecostal and charismatic Christians were largely absent. The statement 'Evangelical Perspectives from Canberra' draws attention to their contribution to the renewal of the Church in its life and worship across the world and regrets the failure of the Assembly to highlight that contribution. In fact, just less than one page of the official report of 396 pages is devoted to them. It is true that very many would be outside the WCC circles by their own choice. But the WCC is thereby the loser, as, it may be argued, are the pentecostal and charismatic traditions. Positive efforts to bridge the gap are needed.

In contending for a balanced, biblically-based pneumatology we should, however, acknowledge the motivation of those in Canberra who may have gone too far in inculturation of the gospel. They were deeply concerned to affirm indigenous peoples who had been oppressed and robbed of their identity. They were showing proper respect for their culture, and no doubt seeking to establish links for the gospel with their spiritual insights. All this stands in marked contrast to the way Christian missions in the past caused untold distress for Aboriginal Australians in destroying their traditional way of life at the same time as bringing the gospel.

One aspect of that story of oppression was the robbing of Aboriginal tribal lands, the owning of which was tied directly to their ancient religion, as is the case with indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. There can be no doubt that such injustices should be righted by governments, and churches, in so far as is possible. Churches, as well as ordinary colonisers, took land and disrupted families. But the relation of land to religion was not adequately discussed at Canberra. A question for Christian theology is, should there still be a close relation? In the Abrahamic and Sinai Covenants God's purposes for his people were directly related to a land. The Jews continue to hold to that provision and as we have noted, other ancient religious traditions are bound up with possession of land. But should Christians in the New Covenant entertain such a link? The question is not

about restoration of land as property filched by incoming foreigners but the religious significance of land in God's purposes today. Is it not true that in the New Testament the land given to God's people in the Old Covenant is taken as a shadow, a physical anticipation, of all the spiritual inheritance in Christ which the Israel of God, renewed in Christ, will enter?

A creation theology

Another area of theological contention, which received insufficient attention, was a Christian understanding of and hope for creation. Of the threat to life on this planet there was full recognition. The JPIC statement and proposed covenants from Seoul in 1990 amply identified the dangers and urgency. And concerning humankind's stewardship of the earth's resources, and the need for repentance of the greed, abuse and irresponsibility, there was no dispute. But there seemed to be an unresolved question, best illustrated by reference to the over-all theme of the Assembly, 'Come, Holy Spirit — Renew the Whole Creation'.

The renewing work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in individual lives is both understood and experienced. And Section IV on the Spirit's transforming and sanctifying work has many valuable things to say in that respect. In what sense, however, is the Holy Spirit to answer the prayer to renew the whole creation? If it means that the churches, and presumably all people of goodwill in whom the Spirit prompts good desires, need the aid of the Spirit to reverse the policies and actions that are threatening all life on the planet, the prayer is both right and urgent. Preservation rather than renewal might be thought a more appropriate word, however.

One Section report confesses that 'we desperately need the dynamic power of the Spirit', in our response to the dangers before us, for 'in the end the main obstacle... lies in our hearts, in our fear of change, in our lukewarmness, in our lack of spirituality, in apathy and uncritical conformity to the status quo, in our lack of trust in God'.

Again, in the sense that generation after generation of human beings, of other creatures, plant life, microscopic building blocks of life, 'renew' life on this planet, and that this whole creative activity is the work of the Spirit consequent upon the divine fiat, the prayer is at least intelligible, although, in fact, this whole process has been going on from the beginning without specific human prayers. God's Spirit does sustain creation. Ps. 104:30 declares, 'You give new life to the whole earth'. We need a renewed understanding of that age-long process and our responsibility as stewards in it, and so the prayer to renew creation can in part be an aligning of our wills and energies with God's purposes.

No Christian understanding of the renewal of creation, however, can leave out Christ's work of reconciliation and redemption in his Cross and Resurrection. As all things were made through Christ, the eternal Word, so all things in heaven and earth will reach their fulfilment in him. The pivotal action in the divine plan is the Cross, for the fulfilment is only possible by a reconciliation established by God himself in Christ. As one of the Sections put it, 'All things have been reconciled to God in Jesus Christ and through

the Spirit we begin to experience God's future'. The latter part of that sentence points to the truth that the Church is a people who now by faith are in a new creation. They have begun to realise now what will ultimately be, the complete Kingdom of God in which all things are reconciled and made new. The Church is a sign, instrument and earnest of the Kingdom. And in whatever ways God's rule is now being established — and here we must speak of his ways of righteousness, justice and love — the new creation is dawning. But the question that must be asked at this point is: 'In what way, if at all, does the present planet and all that is on it, and indeed the universe as we perceive it, partake of this new creation?' That question was not really faced at Canberra.

To emphasise the Cross as the basis for the reconciliation ultimately of all things 'in heaven and earth' is one thing. To be committed to the preservation of life on this planet is another. But is there any direct connection between the two? Can we speak of the present world of time and space being renewed by the Spirit through the Cross? Surely, to speak thus would be to leave out of consideration the eschatological hope. As an American Lutheran bishop said in criticism of Assembly thinking on creation, 'Our fulfilment is beyond the present order of creation'. He was backed up by Dr Mary Tanner who declared, 'The report lacks an eschatological dimension'.

Scripture leads us to expect the total dissolution of the universe we know, the earth and the heavens will 'disappear and wear out like a garment' (Heb. 1:11); created things will be 'shaken and removed so that the things that cannot be shaken will remain' (Heb. 12:27); 'The heavens will disappear with a shrill noise, the heavenly bodies will burn up and be destroyed, and the earth with everything in it will vanish' (2 Pet. 3:10). So, the renewal of creation anticipated in Scripture and springing from the Cross and Resurrection of Christ is not some present work of rejuvenation by the Spirit in answer to our prayer, but a complete 'new heavens and earth'. Though we must by the Spirit's aid take all necessary action to preserve this planet from irresponsible policies and actions, preserve it for future generations, the new creation of God's plan is something entirely fresh that we can barely imagine. This present creation has from the beginning been subject to change and decay, death and birth. Indeed, as we are learning from modern physics, through quantum and chaos theories, there is a certain randomness about the development and evolution of all things. That is a factor which a Christian doctrine of creation must take into account, but for present purposes it serves to emphasise the transient nature of all in our universe.

No understanding of creation and the eschatological hope, however, can afford to ignore Paul's amazing insights in Rom. 8. Creation is in bondage, in slavery to corruption, groaning in the travail of birth-pangs, yet on tiptoe with expectation for the coming glory of God's children. If the bondage and pains refer to change, decay, death and birth, then it was ever thus from the beginning, and aeons before man appeared and affected creation by sin and particularly by failure in stewardship. Paul emphasises that the state creation is in is part of God's larger plan. At last creation will be delivered within the divine plan of redemption and re-creation. But the new creation will be by a new birth — hence the metaphor of the present creation groaning with

birth pangs — not by mere development or evolution even by the Spirit's promptings.

The Assembly's over-all theme: 'Come, Holy Spirit; renew the whole Creation', can only be answered fully in a totally new heavens and earth, but that concept hardly surfaced at Canberra. However, the Section concerned did conclude 'We believe this exploration of creation theology should continue. We as the WCC recommend undertaking a major worldwide study of our understanding of creation and its biblical foundations'. For all sorts of reasons — our greater understanding of God, our part in tackling environmental threats, our response to New Age and similar movements, and the proclamation of Good News in our time — that call must be heeded. We have a crisis in theology.

A crisis of representation

Representation on any body gives access to influence, to power. The WCC aims to have as wide representation as possible from all its member Churches. So it sets goals for delegations to include 40 per cent women, 20 per cent youth and 50 per cent lay persons. In the event at Canberra there were 35 per cent women (compared with 31 at Vancouver) 46 per cent lay (the same as Vancouver) and 11 per cent youth (it was 13 at Vancouver when the age limit was 3 years older). Many women and most youth, and some men, were disgruntled at the churches' failure to meet the quotas, and that did not contribute to a kindly atmosphere in plenary debates.

Only delegates can vote in plenary sessions, but a large number of other persons, in total far more than the delegates, are present. Visitors, stewards, secretaries, consultants can in fact have a significant effect on the way decisions go. Applause and demonstrations must have some influence, particularly from those lobbying for some cause or other. And this, in a vast auditorium (with no air-conditioning equipment) where debates are heard on ear-phones (not always operative) in several languages, is not helped by ineffective chairmanship at times and uncertainty in the application of rules of debate.

Furthermore, there was a marked tendency at Canberra for consultants and moderators or secretaries to present Sections with prepared lines to follow, no doubt in accord with prevailing views within WCC structures. Happily, groups in the Sections were independent enough to exert their own conclusions in the final reports.

When the time came for nominations and appointment of representatives to the Central Committee and new Presidents (seven of them) a most unchristian wrangling, bitter complaining and demanding of places ensued, one category against another, women and youth against regional claims.

All this has two effects — the deepening of divisions between the churches, and the shutting out of persons of competence and proved leadership qualities. In earlier days of the WCC there were giants of long ecumenical experience. Only with great difficulty could they come through the processes today. And yet the WCC is as much in need of such leadership as it ever was.

In the Official Report of the Seventh Assembly recently published, Michael Kinnamon in his personal overview says, 'the lack of substantial theological input — coupled with the shortage of experienced leadership, the dearth of ecumenical memory, and the tyranny of time — meant that the documents 'commended to the church for study and appropriate action' are of less than the highest quality. And the credibility of the Council suffers accordingly'.

The solution to these problems of representation lies in the hands of member churches, the Council is their Council. Do they take their representation seriously enough? The financial problems the WCC is so obviously facing may be due as much to lack of confidence as to their own domestic shortages. It is true that a general impression of a lack of over-all control in Geneva and all the structures was evident at Canberra. Now, there are signs of hope that the new Central Committee reorganisation plans, coupled with a greater reality in expenditure, will ensure that what the churches want doing will get done.

There will, however, remain a wide diversity among the churches. As one Section stated, 'Diversity has always been essential in the life of the Christian Koinonia. It is an expression of the Church's catholicity'. But, it goes on to stress, 'there are also certain limits, namely, the confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Diversity that builds up the body is life giving; diversity that divides and excludes cannot be accepted'.

That brings us back to the fundamental crisis Canberra has brought home afresh. It is well expressed by Michael Kinnamon in the Official Report. The challenge of Canberra is for the World Council to provide a framework wherein such amazing diversity can move beyond encounter to genuine understanding and (dare we hope?) mutual growth in Christ. One of the major mandates from Vancouver in 1983 was for the WCC to develop a "vital and coherent theology" capable of creatively integrating the contextual and the classical, the theoretical and the practical, the concern for continuity and the concern for relevance. But as Dr Heinz Joachim Held noted in his report as Moderator of the Central Committee,

"...despite all the efforts so far made, the task we were set still remains ahead of us".¹

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1 World Council of Churches, Geneva 1991.