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Ecumenical Jubilee

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ECUMENICAL JUBILEE

Jubilee retrospect and millennium prospect, church and world, north and south, world council and ecumenical movement, death by Aids and life in a rapidly growing church, all met in Harare, Zimbabwe last December. There some 5,000 people, a kaleidoscope of race and culture, colour and confession, gathered in a mixture of celebration of what had been achieved and an agonizing longing for still more progress to be made in overcoming the faulty witness of a divided church. Whilst the latter proceeds from the former, it sometimes obscures it. That is to say the ecumenical appetite has been increased and expanded by the distance that the churches have already travelled together since 1948. To hold such diverse traditions and emphases together within one Christian family has, in itself, been no mean achievement at a time when the secular world has known so much bitter conflict.

Martin Conway traces the beginning of this ecumenical journey back to a letter written by William Carey from Calcutta in May 1806 when he pleaded for a 'general association of all denominations' to meet at ten-yearly intervals, and thereafter to the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. Unity is sought not for its own sake but for a missionary purpose, which is at once negative and positive. Negative in seeking to remove the offence of the confusion of a divided Christ. And positive in seeking imaginatively to bring together clear proclamation and the essential witness of a relentless search for an authentic stand for justice in a world that knows so much injustice.

The Assembly met at the University of Zimbabwe, pleasantly elevated on a leafy hillside, above a city seething with anger at the many injustices and indignities suffered by the majority of its inhabitants. This forcefully reminded the assembly participants of the danger of the church becoming isolated from the essential human theatre where God's mission for humanity is engaged day by day. Human Rights, also celebrating a jubilee of concern, 'globalization' and Third World Debts, with clear links with the call to jubilee in *Leviticus*, [enshrined within the assembly theme: Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope] were all, therefore, properly on the Assembly's agenda. How could they be ignored at a meeting taking place in the heart of Africa, a meeting at which the vital contribution that women have to offer to the church was necessarily highlighted.

The Assembly could not be deaf to the note of ecumenical weariness and even church weariness that came from many parts of the world. This sense of malaise was heightened by the estrangement of a group of Orthodox churches [Moscow Patriarchate, Church of Georgia, Church of Serbia and Church of Bulgaria in particular] from the formal structures of the World Council, which they found antipathetic to their own ecclesiological consciences. In other parts of Christendom there were questions about a World Council which did not include in its membership either the Roman Catholic Church or some of the largest groups within the Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions. However, the Assembly did increase its number of African Instituted Churches in Harare by extending fellowship to the Harrist Church in West Africa and the Council of African Instituted Churches from South Africa. Moreover, it was an assembly that was recognizably church, with worship as its 'beating heart', although a common table seemed as elusive as ever.

What of the future? The delegates wrestled with identifying a Common Understanding and Vision for the Council, when the unity already achieved seemed to be under threat and so much more was needed of a church seeking to keep faith with its dominical origins. In such a context it is easier to criticize than identify the positive steps that can be used to take the process forward.

Martin Conway: *Journeying Together Towards Jubilee: The 8th Assembly of the WCC, Harare, December 1998.* Available from Martin Conway, 303 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 2AQ, £3 including postage and packing.