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Lessons from Nairobi

MARTIN CONWAY

OUR MINDS MOVE on quickly these days. By the time you read this article the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Nairobi, Kenya from November 23rd to December 10th, 1975, will have been over for several months. The relatively few news items about it which appeared in our papers at the time (see 5 below) have left no more than fleeting impressions. But the process of learning from the Assembly has barely begun. The 100 or so British participants have been sharing their impressions in a spate of meetings, yet these touch but a fraction of church members. At the national level, the General Synod of the Church of England, for instance, will have had an initial report and debate at its February sessions, and will have directed the Assembly's Section Reports to its various boards and councils, but leaves it to them to distil its conclusions. The fuller accounts of the Assembly will have only started to appear in March or April 1976: Kenneth Slack's *Nairobi Narrative* from the SCM Press and the Assembly Report, *Breaking Barriers*, with an extended narrative introduction by David Paton, from SPCK.

The purpose of this article—and let me say how grateful I am to have been asked to write it—is therefore to try and provide some clues by which we in Britain can start in on that learning process. This is in no sense a complete report; nor of course is it any more than one man's attempt to give an initial account of a rich experience—it will take the committees of the British Council of Churches also a good long while to profit from all the Assembly's findings. But I hope it can both show that such a learning process is worth the effort and offer some keys to doors that might otherwise bar the way.

1. *The Essential Context*

MUCH of what has been appearing in the press, both secular and Christian, about the Nairobi Assembly reveals an astonishing degree of mis-understanding about the World Council of Churches. It may

be well therefore to begin with some relatively obvious but essential points.

(i) Nairobi was a *world* assembly. The 676 delegates of the 286 member churches came from over ninety countries. It is worth remembering that Europe, with 147 delegates from the Western group of countries and 97 from the Eastern, had over 100 votes more than any other region, and that the North Atlantic continents (Europe and North America) had well over half the total Assembly—together with Australia and New Zealand virtually two-thirds. All the same, we were meeting on African soil, in a setting where those who met did so on an equal footing with one another, whatever the diversities in our histories and the way we understand ourselves. Moreover we came from the world as it is, not as each of us is accustomed to think of it. The Russian delegates were evidently surprised at the extent of the information and the concern in other areas about the violations of religious liberty and other human rights in their land. The white Anglican Bishop from South Africa (Philip Russell of Natal) was no doubt surprised when the voting on his amendment to prevent the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism from giving grants to organisations committed to military action showed that none of the black South Africans shared his concern.

So also we in the Western countries, while no doubt expecting a good deal of criticism of the economic history and policies by which we have become and remain rich in a world largely inhabited by the poor, will have been more surprised to find our whole culture and way of life coming under fire:

Let us look straight at—frightened?—the super-monster of our time, Western civilisation. An analysis of the origin and development of this civilisation is beyond the scope of my present responsibility. But we know that no one on this planet of ours today is free from its spiritual and physical impact. . . . This civilisation is not a destructive demon. If it were simply demonic, we would have to initiate a Programme to Combat Western Civilisation. It is rather an ambiguous monster. With its immense spiritual and physical force, it both hurts ('one million Hiroshimas') and heals (modernisation—hospitalisation, education, transportation, etc.) mankind. . . . *All of us* live today in the tension between the two 'prologues'; 'In the beginning was Western Civilisation . . .' and 'In the beginning was the Word . ..'. I see this predicament as the greatest theological-civilisational challenge and opportunity for human-kind and for the Church.¹

(ii) Nairobi was an Assembly of the *churches*. Each member church, subject only to guidelines laid down by the Council's Central Committee (and which I have not heard questioned), elected its own delegates by its own processes. To squeeze the length and breadth of the Church of England, for instance, into eleven delegates will seem to those of us inside that church a difficult business—though how much easier than to select the two delegates of the Presbyterian Church of

Ireland or the one from the Union of Welsh Independents! But it was done, and it was the delegates who at every point had the final say. Moreover it is entirely up to the churches to make what they will—or not—of the experience of the Assembly and of its findings. The Council as such has no authority over the churches and does not seek it. 'Any authority that it may have will consist in the weight it carries with the churches by its wisdom,' wrote William Temple in his explanatory Memorandum of 1938² and that principle remains fully operative both in the WCC constitution and in practice—as eloquently witnessed by the controversies in this country around the Council in recent years.

The American Methodist John Deschner did the Assembly a signal service in casting his address on church unity in the shape of a Bible study on the first Council as reported in Acts 15:

Why does this meeting take place? It is obviously not routine. It is not called to continue a tradition of such meetings nor with a rule book of proper procedure in hand. It is an emergency meeting, called to answer an urgently felt local need, to face an urgent new issue, to let the Church's unity penetrate an urgently necessary new diversity. The young church is badly polarised about message and mission. On one hand are those concerned for tradition, for continuity with Israel. . . . On the other hand are those probing their freedom to bring the gospel to utterly new peoples, in a world where Israel's traditions are meaningless. . . . Unity and freedom: an ancient controversy in the community of faith.

But the meeting is called for a deeper reason. The local churches not only argue, they reach out for each other: that is the impressive thing. They need to meet, though doubtless the radicals regard it as diversionary and the conservatives as compromising. There is a kind of elemental hunger to take counsel together over this crisis, for both sides are somehow felt to belong to the whole. Conciliar life is the presupposition for a conciliar event, and that life is already a local reality before the meeting. Therefore delegates are appointed and sent to express visibly the fellowship already there, and to clarify the whole church's mind about its badly divided mission.

He took care to point out the limiting factors in virtue of which the Assembly in Nairobi in contrast to the one in Jerusalem could be considered no more than 'pre-conciliar'. Yet it was the similarities, despite the centuries of separation, that stood out.

(iii) Nairobi was an Assembly of the WCC. The churches did not need to meet this time *ab initio*: over half of them had resolved nearly thirty years ago to establish the Council as their instrument, and it has been ever since an occasion, indeed an embodiment, of the churches' commitment to worship and witness together. One of the central tasks of the Assembly was to review what had been done over the last seven years by the whole network of committees and projects to which the last Assembly had given rise (presented in a notable synthesis by the book *Uppsala to Nairobi*, SPCK, 1975), and then to set guidelines

for the period ahead and elect a Central Committee to oversee them. The longer the WCC exists and the more concerns the churches pursue together in the framework it provides, the more we are dealing with permanent, in-built relationships between churches and groups of churches, many of whom could have otherwise no contact with each other and no way of bearing a united witness at the world level.

This is in part why meetings of the WCC are so very different—often to us disturbingly different—from gatherings of ‘older’ and ‘younger’ churches whose particular partnership took its rise in ‘foreign missions’. Not that the one in any way excludes the other: within the universal framework of the WCC there is plenty of room for more particular alliances—geographical, confessional, by specific topics, etc. But there is a very different feel about a meeting where all come together on an equal footing: where there is no inbuilt primacy to ‘givers’ as opposed to ‘receivers’, where the spiritual initiative can come as much from the ‘newly established’ as from the ‘historic’ churches, where no one language or culture or way of doing things can be presupposed as acceptable to all. On all three of these counts we British still often find ourselves at something of a loss.

Responsibility and Questions

INDEED the most general, overall effect of sharing in a meeting such as the Nairobi Assembly is to be sent home with both a heightened sense of responsibility and a load of sharply self-critical questions. Are we playing our proper part, on behalf also of all those other churches, however odd, in the one world mission entrusted to us by Christ? Are we making full use of the riches available to us in the total Christian tradition and experience? Or have we in practice settled for much less than the full message of the gospel? Have we come to see our task in a far narrower horizon than the ends of the inhabited earth? Of course nobody can expect the Church of England overnight to incorporate African dancing or a Russian Orthodox sense for the transcendent into our Sunday liturgies, let alone the Archbishop of Canterbury to speak in the bitter revolutionary tones of a Palestinian excluded from his homeland. But we fail in our spirituality, as those who belong first and foremost to Christ and only secondly to England, if we do not seek in Christ and by his Spirit to grow into what such others have to give us.

In line with this awareness of the relativity of each particular set of habits and expectations, it was particularly appropriate that the group set aside to prepare a Message from the Assembly should cast their work in the form of prayers, and prayers to be shared and used in local congregations. The Assembly was hardly of a mind to blow its own trumpet, as it were, over against others who would have very

different opinions; it was much more aware of itself largely sharing the knowledge, the yearnings, the struggles of the rest of mankind, and wanting to entrust itself not to human power but to the redeeming power of God. It did not see itself as standing over against the local churches, telling them from a superior distance what they ought to be doing, but as standing with and on behalf of the local churches, offering out of the sharper clarity of a world meeting prayers that all Christians can make our own.

2. *An Assembly of repentance*

THAT in turn points to what was for me one of the striking characteristics of the Nairobi Assembly: again and again there was stressed and demonstrated the primacy of repentance in the Christian life, the healing and life-saving possibility of throwing oneself on the mercy of God and of trusting in His forgiveness rather than in anything of one's own.

Hardly, perhaps what one would have expected from the Assembly theme 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites'. The note of repentance was brought out in a general way in the paraphrase of the parable of the lost son (Luke 15: 11-32) that was devised by the United Bible Societies and compered by Archbishop Coggan. But it was the second plenary session on the main theme that gave it a new and disturbing centrality. This session was devoted to an address by the American Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown. He too had chosen the form of a Bible study, this time on the conversation between Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16: 13-23). 'Who do men say that I am?'—over against the disciples' answers were set several of those that might be given today. 'And who do you say that I am?'—alongside Peter's confession were heard the voices as it were of ten contemporary apostles in different situations and of different outlooks, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer and James Cone.

Brown then invited us to linger with that second question: Jesus is asking us, of course, about himself, but he is also *forcing us to examine ourselves*: 'Who am I to whom this question is addressed?' If the 'I' is a black African the nuances of the answer will be different than if the 'I' is a white African . . . if the 'I' is a woman, we will learn some things about Jesus that are denied to us as long as the 'I' is a man. This is why as we hear one another's answers throughout this assembly we need to know as much as possible about the 'I' who is answering. We need to realise, furthermore, that the 'I' who answers the question will be changed both by encounter with the Jesus who is asking the question, and by encounter with others who are answering the question. . . .

From there he went on: 'it would be dishonest for me to ignore the fact that who I am—or at least what I symbolise—makes many of you uncomfortable, uneasy, and perhaps even angry. It is an important

part of our grappling with Jesus' questions to face this openly and honestly.'

On at least four counts, many of you will have reason for concern. I am *white* in a world that is unjustly dominated by whites, speaking in a black country to an assembly predominantly non-white. I am a *male* in a world that is male-dominated in ways that have been destructive for many, if not most, women. I am a member of a relatively affluent *class* in a world that is overwhelmingly poor and that is manipulated by a small affluent minority. And lastly I am a citizen of the *United States of America* in a world where both small and large nations are struggling to become free from the political, economic and military domination of the United States of America. Thus I symbolise (though I hope I do not personally embody) the various oppressions that many of you, in the name of the gospel, are struggling to overcome—racism, sexism, classism and imperialism.

I will not continue the litany of shame; many of you can recite it with greater feeling and detail than I. But I must recognise that what it describes has been terribly destructive for many of you, and I must hope that you can believe that in different, but very deep, ways it has been terribly destructive for me as well.

This is not to say that all oppression emanates from Washington, or that to live in the third world is automatically to be endowed with virtue. We know things are not that simplistic. But it is to say that all of us must seriously take Jesus' admonition to look first at the logs within our own eyes before we concentrate on the splinter in someone else's eye. Whether we will dare to be freed by him to do that at Nairobi is one of the things this assembly is all about.

That was why, incidentally but with powerful effect on the rest of the Assembly, he read the rest of his address in Spanish—"there is no reason why the linguistic concessions should always come from you". More important, as he proceeded with the exploring of what it meant to confess Jesus the liberator and Jesus the unifier he took up again and again those four factors in his own position and spoke of his desire to repent of all the sin in which they made him share. Several times over we came to the fork: 'Let me try to suggest some of the things this would have to mean for me; only you can determine what it might mean for you.'

The central passage on Jesus the unifier is this:

In the Matthew passage with which we began, Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He does exactly that, exposing himself to the ultimate division and separation, residing in the powers of sin and death. He bears the full brunt of their attack and they destroy him. But it is our faith that the story does not end there, and that in facing those enemies he has overcome them, for, even as was promised, on the third day God raised him from the dead. Here is our promise that if we too face division and separation, we will find that beyond the division and separation is healing and unity, for Jesus draws us into oneness with his Father.

How do we, here and now, begin to move beyond our divisions toward

that kind of unity? There is only one way, and we know what it involves. It involves confession and repentance, before God and to one another. In the days ahead this will involve reaching out toward one another at risk, officially and unofficially, individually and corporately, hoping to be heard and accepted, but willing if necessary to endure rebuff patiently, believing that sooner or later the healing power of the risen Christ can reach out across the awesome divisions by which we are presently scarred.

It is not my task to tell you what sins you should confess. But it is my task to suggest that along the path this Assembly walks, mutual confession and forgiveness will be important ways in which we respond to Jesus the Unifier. For out of common *repentance* can come the beginnings of a new common *obedience*, in which we mutually pledge to struggle together to destroy both the inner attitudes and the outer structures that perpetuate the evils we must eradicate. By such steps toward one another we could begin to embody a little more fully the unity we so easily talk about.

In the ensuing discussion this same theme of repentance was picked out by an Indian Orthodox, Bishop Ostathios. In the 1972/1973 Bangkok conference, he suggested, people from the third world had spent a lot of time attacking the evil effects of the first world, the West. Here now was a spokesman of that first world humbly offering his own self-criticism. If only many more of us could follow his example, what a different and much healthier atmosphere would result.

Africa in the lead

TO a happily large extent, this is what the Assembly managed to do. The lead came from Africa. First when the play *Muntu* by Joe de Graft, the contribution of the All-African Conference of Churches to the opening plenaries and which was a stylised retelling of the history of the continent, made it quite plain that the primal harmony of Africa had started to break up even before the Arabs and the Europeans arrived to plunder and despoil. No holds were barred in making it plain to the outsiders just how harmful almost all of their influence has been and just how strongly Africa wishes we would all leave them alone. But that unpalatable message was set within a no less clear and deliberate awareness of the ways in which—then and now—Africa has mistreated itself.

Similarly, the General Secretary of the All-Africa Conference of Churches made a notable response from the floor to part of the speech by Michael Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica. The latter, probably the best orator heard in the course of the Assembly, had made a moving if somewhat idealist plea to make of history 'a truly moral process' and had seen a particular role in this for the Third World:

The Third World is the term used to describe all those nations who are the contemporary victims of the forces of domination and oppression in history. As a group, therefore, it may represent man's hope for the

attempt to find a moral basis for the conduct of international affairs. However, it remains only a hope as yet, since the Third World needs to be absolutely clear about its own moral foundations, purposes and goals. Equally, the Third World must first set its own house in order by tackling all the internal inequalities and injustices among its members. And it is precisely this search for a moral basis to collective action, as distinct from the cynical self-interest which is at the heart of realpolitik, that mankind needs most urgently now.

Canon Burgess Carr, a forthright, even pugnacious figure, known to the West particularly for his espousing of certain African demands that we find uncomfortable—the moratorium on foreign missionaries for instance—rose to ask just how Manley could substantiate that:

Many of us in the churches know that our capacity to influence the course of history does indeed depend on the integrity of moral behaviour in our nations. Unfortunately we are often driven to deep despair. Here on the continent of Africa, for example, there is not a single leader who brought his country to independence who has been replaced except by a military coup—not a single one. We have five life presidents—legal life presidents—and the rest of them, I dare say, behave as if they are there for life. You meet in a region where—near to us—there are constant upheavals, massacres, murder of hundreds of thousands of people—for nothing; for nothing. Mr. Prime Minister I want you to tell us, as a leader in the Third World and speaking for your colleagues who are African heads of state, what moral force can they claim?

In this climate of open, self-critical and repentant speaking the clash with Third World delegates which many Westerners had feared—perhaps with sore memories of earlier WCC meetings—never in fact took place. There was plenty of straight speaking about economic and cultural imperialism, as I have illustrated. No Westerner could come away imagining that the rest of the world thought of us as a wholly benign set of forces and influences! But there was an overarching awareness that the crises and evils and dilemmas are a common burden on us all, which we must bear together in mutual exposure, in mutual support, not in any self-righteous distancing of one from the other.

Handling international affairs

THIS same note came out, paradoxically, in the latter part of the Assembly when resolutions on current international affairs were being presented. One sub-committee had been charged with proposing these and its proposals inevitably attracted a lot of attention. Some, that might have been expected to be hotly debated, went through quickly: a resolution for instance calling on Western European churches to try and prevent the growing collaboration in matters of nuclear energy between their countries and South Africa. Those, however,

on which the Assembly dwelt were those where one or more of the protagonists tried to maintain that there was no case to answer. The Assembly was clearly unwilling to allow anyone to consider his government or people above question. The Indonesians were made to come clean over the current fighting in East Timor. The Brazilians were not allowed to hush up the matter of torture and oppression of political opposition in their country. Most striking of all, the Russians were not allowed to obstruct the call for full investigation of the position in their land of religious liberty, as part of human rights in general.

Anthony Wilson, the British fraternal delegate of the Friends' World Committee (the Quakers are not members of the WCC, being unable to accept the specific doctrinal formulations of the Basis), remarks perceptively on this last episode: 'The issue produced rapid polarisation on the floor of the Assembly. My own thought at the time was that the heady tourist atmosphere of Nairobi had produced a new generation of Great White Hunters who were on the scent of the Russian bear.' While the Russians had made their own case infinitely worse by their over-defensive reaction to the letter from the two dissidents earlier published in *Target*, and by a naïvely aggressive response in plenary session to the idea of an investigation, some of the sense of satisfaction among Western delegates at the outcome—let alone the glee of the Western press (*The Times* gave this episode three of its ten headlines)—does us little credit either. That the overall atmosphere, however, remained one of mutual repentance was shown by the notable speech made after the final vote by Protopresbyter Vitaly Borovoy on behalf of the Russian delegation: we abstained because we still think most of you have not sufficiently understood the situation in our country, but we intend to remain loyal members of this Council and will co-operate fully with the General Secretary in his investigations.

Most of us, says Anthony Wilson, are left guessing at the significance of these events. It seems clear that Western, Protestant assumptions which, first, elevate the individual conscience or concern to a point at which it can challenge the church and, second, place church and state in distinct and distinctive roles vis-a-vis each other, are neither of them assumptions which are shared by large numbers of other member Churches. The tradition which enables American speakers to be the most trenchant critics of their own government's policies is not a tradition which can easily become rooted in countries which place a heavier emphasis on social cohesion, but it *is* the ethos of the WCC in Geneva.

Those of us who enjoy that tradition owe it at least to others who do not to understand their problems with it in the most sensitive and informed way possible. The atmosphere of mutual repentance so often exemplified at Nairobi, if only we can hold on to it in our continuing care for one another, will be the best possible setting for doing so.

3. *A Both/And Assembly*

A SECOND major characteristic of this Assembly is that on a large number of matters the Assembly wanted to affirm both sides of an argument, whether or not it was able to state the resulting consensus in a convincing way.

Probably the most evident of these matters, and the one on which I believe and hope the Nairobi Assembly will have successfully resolved the argument, is the long-standing dispute about the nature of mission. The Uppsala Assembly—to go no further back—had had a vociferous and unsatisfactory struggle between those who favoured a 'total' approach, in which all the different aspects of the work of the church were seen as sharing in Christ's mission, and those who emphasised the cutting edge of personal evangelism addressed to those not yet aware of their need for salvation nor of the offer of forgiveness and eternal life held out in Christ. The WCC world mission conference at Bangkok in 1972/1973 had addressed itself again to the puzzle and had come up with conclusions which—despite tendentious misreporting by Peter Beyerhaus and some other Europeans—had gone a long way to resolving it (cf. *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXII No. 246, April 1973, perhaps especially the 'Affirmation' on p. 183f., the report of Section II on pp. 198-201, and the 'personal statement' by M. M. Thomas, pp. 158-169). So also had the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation called by the Billy Graham Organisation in 1974, despite earlier fears (and the express desire of some) that that Congress would lead to an institutionalised polarisation between 'evangelical' and 'ecumenical' such as we have known to be so disastrous in the academic community in this country.

One of the chief architects of the Lausanne Covenant, John Stott, was invited to the Nairobi Assembly to make a public response to the main speech on evangelism by Bishop Mortimer Arias, of the Methodist Church in Bolivia. His impromptu ending was an effective cry for reconciliation:

We are all conscious, I think, of the wide gap of confidence and credibility that exists today between many ecumenical leaders and evangelicals—if you like between Geneva and Lausanne. What can be done about this gap? Ecumenical leaders genuinely question whether evangelicals have a heartfelt commitment to social action. We evangelicals say that we have but I personally recognise that we have got to supply more evidence that we have. On the other hand evangelicals genuinely question whether the WCC has any longer a heartfelt commitment to worldwide evangelisation. They say they have—but I beg this Assembly to supply more evidence that this is so.

The preceding speech by Bishop Arias, on top of M. M. Thomas' characteristically sober and profound discussion of the emerging consensus between Bangkok, Lausanne and the Roman Synod of Bishops, had already provided a good deal of such evidence, but

Section I on 'Confessing Christ Today' also proved to be eager to respond to Stott's plea.

The report opens with an unequivocal affirmation:

Today's world offers many political lords as well as secular and religious saviours. Nevertheless, as representatives of Churches gathered together in the WCC, we boldly confess Christ alone as Saviour and Lord. We confidently trust in the power of the gospel to free and unite all children of God throughout the world.

and it ends on a note of urgency:

Confessing Christ must be done *today*. 'Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6: 2). It cannot wait for a time that is comfortable for us. We must be prepared to proclaim the Gospel when human beings need to hear it. But in our zeal to spread the Good News, we must guard against the fanaticism which disrupts the hearing of the gospel and breaks the community of God. The world requires and God demands that we recognise the urgency to proclaim the saving word of God—today. God's acceptable time demands that we respond in all haste. 'And how terrible it would be for me if I did not preach the Gospel!' (1 Cor. 9: 16).

The pages in between repeat over and over again the primacy of explicit evangelism without in the least back-tracking on the need to see that primacy in the framework of the spirit-filled community (in the sort of way the Orthodox will insist on) nor on the need to carry obedience into all realms of human living (in the sort of way the Western churches have been learning in the past 50 years). It is a remarkably unpolemic yet strong and clear text. Voices were heard to say, in the plenary debate on it, that the Section in its eagerness to supply John Stott with evidence had underestimated the contemporary difficulties in setting before our fellow humans the specific and coherent substance of the gospel, had given the urge to evangelise an unbalanced priority over the content of the message. The follow-up may well have to go in that direction, and it will be important that those who consider themselves 'evangelicals' should share in and support such efforts. But for the moment let us rejoice in an important, eirenic statement which brings out the best from both sides in the recent controversies and points us to the common commitment.

This reconciliation was not only, however, a matter of the Section explicitly devoted to evangelism. I have already illustrated how the keynote address by Robert McAfee Brown, not a man expected to be tender to Evangelicals, dug deep into questions of repentance and personal faith; it was especially significant that the first response to his speech was from the delegate of one of the relatively few Pentecostal churches in membership, Manuel de Mello, chief evangelist of Brasil para Cristo: my people don't know much if anything about this so-called theology of liberation, but if that is what it is we want it. 'I want to say to Mr. Brown that my church members are fully behind you!' Still more striking was the way in which the report of Section

VI, on 'Human Development—the ambiguities of power, technology and quality of life', which had to go into the many facets of the huge crises facing our civilisation—population, use of the earth's resources, justice between rich and poor, the arms race and trade, the role of multi-national corporations, etc.—nevertheless ended with two pages that are almost a monastic document, an appeal to a new asceticism in the Christian life:

In the biblical tradition, being human is not dependent upon human achievement or success. Rather, our worth is dependent upon acceptance by God, in spite of our shortcomings.

Justification by grace through faith is seen to be central also to our whole ecological/consumer dilemma!

An unsolved tension

A POINT on which the Assembly failed to set out a position that could bring together the two halves of an argument it clearly longed to resolve was that concerning the theological basis of 'dialogue with people of living faiths and ideologies'. The WCC has undertaken since the Uppsala Assembly a far-reaching programme in this field, involving both bi-lateral meetings with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Marxists and those involved with 'primal world-views', and two carefully prepared multi-lateral conferences with small but representative groups from several faith communities. The first of these, held at Ajaltoun in the Lebanon in 1970, was evaluated by the Central Committee at its Addis Ababa meeting in 1971; on that occasion it became evident that the outstanding discussion among Christians was that between those (largely, but by no means only Asians) who were convinced that Christians had to adventure into such dialogue in confidence that the Holy Spirit would be at work there, and those (largely Europeans with little experience of 'other faiths' but bitter memories of the disastrous accommodations of the 'German Christians' under Hitler) who were convinced that Christians must stand clearly on an agreed basis of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

A consultation of theologians had addressed itself to this issue at Zürich in 1970, and had produced a powerful but difficult rationale for dialogue ('Christians in Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths', first published in the *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LIX No. 236, October 1970, and reprinted in *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 1971, pp. 33-43), e.g.:

It is *because* of faith in God through Jesus Christ and *because* of our belief in the reality of Creation, the offer of Redemption, and the love of God shown in the Incarnation that we seek a positive relationship with men of other faiths (para. 8). . . . For dialogue between Christians and men of other living faiths, being understood within the context of God's

mission to all men, stems from love and is seeking the fruit of love. True love never only gives. It is also concerned always to receive (para. 16). Again, M. M. Thomas with characteristic insight had picked on this issue for one crucial section of his moderator's report to the Nairobi Assembly:

It is perhaps here (sc. in relation to the Christian theology of dialogue with people of living faiths and secular ideologies) that we have the deepest theological cleavage demanding fuller exploration.

Starting once more from the 'tentative approaches' of the Lausanne covenant and the Bangkok Conference, he went on to ask:

Is it not legitimate to welcome a Christ-centred process of inter-religious and inter-cultural penetration through dialogue? If you will permit the use of the word 'syncretism' to denote all processes of interpenetration between cultures and religions, the only answer to a wrong syncretism which means the uncritical, superficial, normless mixing of basically incompatible religious conceptions and cultural attitudes is a Christ-centred syncretism which grapples with and evaluates all concepts and attitudes critically in the light of Jesus Christ and converts them into vehicles for communicating the truth of the gospel and for expressing its meaning for life.

In the immediate discussion this paragraph was taken up, hesitantly by the Bishop of Helsinki: where is the Biblical basis for any understanding of Christ at work in other religions? And then critically by Metropolitan Paulos Gregorios, who was to be moderator of Section III: a theology of dialogue is unnecessary—we need rather a theology of how the salvation in Jesus Christ affects the whole of humanity and of the cosmos.

Section III addressed itself not directly to this issue but to 'Seeking Community—the common search of people of various faiths, cultures and ideologies'. In line with this title, which built on the second of the multi-lateral conferences (see *Towards World Community: Resources and Responsibilities for Living Together*, ed. S. J. Samartha, Geneva: WCC, 1975) the Assembly took a symbolic step of no little importance in welcoming representatives—one each—from five other religious communities: Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Jew. Yet it could not avoid the inner-Christian tensions. Its first report to the plenary is clearly critical of the misuse of Christian faith:

We cannot allow our faith, the gift of our sense of community in Jesus Christ to add to the tensions and suspicions and hatreds that threaten to tear apart the one family of humanity. (Introduction para 4)

yet can only again and again take refuge in the familiar, but inevitably unsatisfactory 'Some . . . others . . . yet others . . .' formula when it comes to making positive assertions (cf. Part I paras 1, 3, 4). Even so the draft was heavily criticised by several European speakers for missing out on clear Christian affirmations: Gerhardsson from Sweden, Mehl from France, Lønning from Norway, Michael from Russia,

Payne from Britain. On a motion from Bishop Lønning it was referred back to the Section.

When it reappeared in plenary it was prefaced by a Preamble which made five points by way of context, e.g.

3. We are all agreed that the Great Commission of Jesus Christ which asks us to go out into all the world . . . should not be abandoned or betrayed, disobeyed or compromised . . .

4. We are all opposed to any form of syncretism, incipient, nascent or developed, if we mean by syncretism conscious or unconscious human attempts to create a new religion . . .

The tone, if not the wording, of the resulting amalgam was then sharply attacked by a number of Asians, especially Lynn da Silva and Wesley Ariarajah from Sri Lanka, and also by Mrs. Margaretha Brown of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA: 'we Christians in North America, ideologically isolated but neighbours of many Jews, badly need to benefit from the experience of Christians from multi-cultural situations in the Third World, more than from the more familiar experience of Europe.' It could be taken as a deadlock; Bishop Leslie Newbigin is not wrong to refer to this as 'a most unsatisfactory situation, as the real theological issues had not been clarified and the debate had been conducted on the basis of an emotional confrontation between Europe and Asia rather than on a penetrating analysis of the issues' (in his personal report printed as an Appendix to that of the Church of England delegates to the General Synod: 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites', GS 285, p. 21). Fair enough, yet the Assembly was prepared to adopt the resulting report, *with* its preamble, by an overwhelming majority. Merely acquiescence and weariness? Perhaps, but I hope I am not entirely idealistic in believing that the Assembly dimly realised that *both* positions were largely right and that the confrontation could have been resolved if only more of us had had enough wisdom and first-hand experience to be able to articulate clearly some such way through as had been offered by the Zürich consultation and M. M. Thomas.

Other examples

THERE is not the space to go as fully into the several other examples of the way in which the Assembly insisted on a *both-and* approach, but let me at least mention the headings:

—in the matter of the *role of women* and oppression by sexism, on which much heat and energy had been expended in preparing the Assembly: 20% of the delegates were women; one of the eight major plenary sessions was devoted to this theme; Section V made it one of its three sub-topics under the general heading 'Structures of Injustices and Struggles for Liberation'; as one of my colleagues remarked 'It was

surely a new thing for people at a church meeting to find speaking after them on any subject a woman who was at least as knowledgeable and committed as they were!' Yet the Assembly insisted in its report, as had Una Kroll in her outstanding contribution to the plenary session, that the goal was not any form of women's liberation per se, but 'a full partnership', a 'mutual inter-dependence' between men *and* women, for the sake of which attention must now be paid to the serious imbalances and injustices from which women are still all too often suffering—as, in different ways, are many men also.

—in the matter of *human rights*, there was a clear desire to articulate a standpoint in Christian faith and obedience that would provide a *universal* basis for reaching out in solidarity and service to all whose rights are violated: individuals *and* whole communities, those under tyrannical regimes *and* those in apparently democratic societies. Tom Wright explicitly congratulated Section V on an approach that did equal justice to Beyers Naudé *and* Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The subsequent resolutions on current international affairs showed a corresponding determination to accept cries for help wherever they might come from.

—in the matter of *membership of the WCC* it was striking that the Assembly which received into formal relationship the Church of the Lord (Aladura) and three other African 'independent' churches (and which saw the 'Church of Jesus Christ on earth by the prophet Simon Kimbangu' elected to a seat on the Central and Executive Committees of the Council) should also explicitly insist on inviting the Roman Catholic Church to reconsider its decision not to apply for membership. It also saw the Orthodox churches, despite their evident difficulties with many of the habits of mind of the majority, enter more fully than ever before into virtually all the discussions.

—in the matter of *worship*, an attempt had been made to move away from the patterns that relegated times of worship to the margins, as pious but inessential decorations, and to choose paths by which the work and the worship would be much more fully integrated. This needs to be taken a lot further: all too few of the moderators and officers of various groupings seized the opportunities with appropriate vigour and imagination; the three eucharistic liturgies in particular were all tragically narrow—in conception as well as in confessional discipline—and unintegrated with the other business of the Assembly. But when the proposed integration worked—best of all, to my mind, in the plenary session on Christian unity, whose various speeches were all woven into a pattern of praise, repentance and prayer—the Assembly took on the feel of a first-fruits of humanity yearning for the Kingdom of God rather than that of a church business meeting. The special issue of *RISK* which served as the worship book of the Assembly is a model of what could be done much more widely, locally quite as much as nationally.

—in the matter of *the nature of the World Council*, there was throughout a sensible balance of concern for the world church as a whole *and* for the local churches in all their particularities. Here Philip Potter's General Secretary's report set the tone, emphasising both the global character of all the great issues of our time, which requires the 'mobilising of world Christian forces to meet them', *and* the appropriate 'local and particular applications'. He spoke too of the need 'to work out ways in which there can be a genuine chain of partnership in obedience between the people of God in each place and in all places'. This strain was taken up frequently in the discussions, if often with rather too much implied faith in the ability of the WCC to do the necessary and too little imagination of what could be done to ensure it by the local or national churches. Most significant, each of the Sections had been asked—for the first time I believe—to formulate a short second part of their report with nothing but recommendations to the churches. The results admittedly tend to look like an unending list of huge, vague recommendations to put the world to rights tomorrow; they need a good deal of refining and specifying in each setting. But at least they are inescapable evidence that the Assembly wished not only to enunciate general ideas and principles but also to see them implemented in quite definite ways in the churches it represented. The World Council must not be left to be the affair of people in Geneva, let alone in national headquarters or in universities and special institutes; it is the Council of and for the local churches.

The matter of *the church's unity* requires a little more space. For there is a rumour going around that the WCC has in some way 'abandoned' its earlier commitment to this. In the week that I came to write this I happened on an instance—Edwin Robertson, beginning a report in the *Baptist Times* on a local venture: 'Now that the WCC appears to have put uniting the church fairly low down on its agenda, the matter is referred to the local church.' Of course the matter is indeed—see my previous paragraph—referred to the local church. It always has been; the WCC has never to my knowledge spoken as if the local church had to wait for someone somewhere else before it could launch its own initiatives and experiments (Roman Catholics please note!). But it is entirely false to speak of the World Council weakening its commitment, and it can only be a deliberate misrepresentation to claim to find this appearance in the Nairobi Assembly.

What has been happening is a steady broadening and deepening of the shared understanding of what we mean by the unity we seek, in face both of the successes and difficulties encountered by the churches that have adventured along the road, and of the actual relations and strivings of the churches. Thus, on one hand, recent statements about unity are much more positive about the proper diversities to be expected in a church that genuinely holds together all sorts and conditions of men and women, more anxious to avoid any appearance that unity

could involve any cultural or liturgical uniformity, any false centralising or bureaucratic control. This has been one major motive behind the terminology of unity as 'conciliar fellowship' which the Nairobi Assembly so warmly espoused. On another, the experience of the WCC—as of the churches at all levels—has made it ever clearer that the subject of unity had better not be kept in its own little corner, cut off from the work on evangelism, on social responsibility, on the relief of want, etc., etc. All those things may contribute in very real and costly ways to effective unity among Christians—or may hinder it, as when evangelism slides into group proselytism, when the relief of want becomes organisational aggrandisement, etc. Precisely because the church is called to be a single body in Christ, a body whose head can control all the different works of its different limbs, the concern for unity is incarnate—or not—in all that Christians get up to. All six Sections at Nairobi were in fact working for and about unity, not only the one that has that word in its title.

More controversial, perhaps, has been the attempt of the World Council in recent years to articulate the way in which the unity of the church belongs with a vision of the unity of mankind. Some have feared that this can only be a distraction, let alone evidence of a quasi-political Messianism. Not so. It grew precisely out of the need to set the concern for unity in a wider perspective, a perspective that could be recognised by Church people of all sorts as having to do with what they would feel to be central in their faith and life, and which would save unity from sounding like merely another boring and bothersome piece of reorganisation. As was memorably shown at Nairobi, in what were to my mind three of the most effective pieces of speaking, the divisions and antagonisms of the churches are actively, tragically caught up in the divisions and antagonisms of human groups—whether the caste and religious divides of Sri Lanka (Wesley Ariarajah), the tribal and church feuds of Northern Ireland (Gordon Gray) or the racial and political tensions of South Africa (Manas Buthelezi). Thus it is 'in order to be faithful to our calling to unity (that) we must consider this calling within the wider context of the unity and diversity of humankind. It is because we have often failed to do this that many have dismissed the quest for Church unity as irrelevant to their real concerns' (Section II: 'What Unity requires').

But this broadening and deepening—exemplified also in quite another way in Section II's report by a meditation from an Orthodox on the triune being of God—is in no sense a weakening of the commitment to unity. The Archbishop of Uppsala spoke forcefully on the point, and his words are echoed in the concluding paragraphs of the Section Report:

Above all, there are sharp questions which demand answers not in words but in decisions by the member churches: Why does the visible, organic union of churches in the same region move so slowly? Why—

after so many decades—have we not reached that common understanding of the faith which would enable us to share together in the Eucharist at this Assembly where we have confessed Christ together and known his presence in our midst? Why—if we speak in terms of conciliarity—do we not move more rapidly from our present pre-conciliar stage to a fuller conciliar fellowship in a shared Eucharist? And, if the answer is ‘Because we are not united’, the question comes again: ‘Then why do we not unite?’

The discussions in the year ahead on the ten propositions put forward by the (English) Churches’ Unity Commission or on the (Welsh) Covenanting for Union will no doubt reveal whether Christians in this part of the world have the will to move ahead. Any sluggishness that we show need not be blamed on the World Council.

Looking beyond our blinkers

IN all these different fields, then, my impression is that the Nairobi Assembly showed itself anxious to respond positively to what was true on both sides of some dichotomy or argument. Sometimes it managed to do so well, sometimes less well, but its success matters less than the manifest intention. It is not fortuitous, to my mind, that this should be so. For precisely in a world Assembly, where delegates have to struggle to take seriously the concerns of people from such very different backgrounds to their own, many of one’s own familiar—dare I say favourite?—inner-Christian arguments and polarisations are shown up as parochial. We tend to dress up a dispute as a matter of universal truth and error. Put it in the setting of a world assembly of Christians and it will often be seen to reflect only the blinkers of a particular heritage or culture. Now of course there are disputes as between universal truth and error, and the WCC is constantly aware of them. But in the world setting it takes a careful process of sounding out whether people really mean what they sound to mean in other ears before an argument can be diagnosed as that sort of dispute, a process moreover in which with good will—and given the nature of the WCC those without that will soon absent themselves—the person or party which could be in error has every opportunity to realise the danger and amend his ways. Thus the challenge of the Nairobi Assembly, as of every aspect of WCC life, is less ‘are we right or wrong?’ than ‘are we profound enough in our understanding and wide enough in our sympathies to see our puzzles in a world perspective and to draw appropriate conclusions?’

4. How Did It Work?

AT this point I should like to make an excursus on to two points that touch not so much the substance as the manner of the Assembly’s work, but which have a great deal to do with the ways in which the

Assembly (and the WCC in general) is received and understood in this country.

The first concerns the procedures of an Assembly. When we gathered four of the British participants a day or two before the close to record, for publication on cassette, a conversation about the Assembly and its findings it was difficult to get them talking about anything else than their problems and frustrations with the Assembly's ways of working. Language is only the most obvious: although British people have the enormous advantage that some 90% of the business is done in our language (and the more the WCC has become a universal fellowship the more English dominates), we are easily dismayed that everything has to be slowed down for translation and, still more, that most other people, using an English that is for them a second or third language, cannot speak or write it with what we regard as a 'normal' fluency, care and delicacy. Complaints about 'Geneva English', however justified by the standards of Stratford or Oxbridge, are again usually no more than a measure of our own parochialism.

But there are several other facets to the problem. One is the matter of rules for debate. The WCC has of course its rules and has often revised them in the light of experience. For myself I doubt if they could be improved very much. But they undoubtedly appear to be complicated and bothersome when read 'cold' by new delegates, let alone when experienced in the heat of a debate where matters you care about deeply are at stake. Anthony Wilson again put his finger on the nub of the problem: 'This was supposed to be an Assembly of amateurs—80% of us attending for the first time—but the practices and procedures of the plenary sessions demanded a degree of professionalism which we expect from diplomats at the United Nations.' In such a meeting there is no avoiding a certain level of competence. How can our churches conceivably train our delegates to be adequate for this without losing freshness?

Another has to do with the intrinsic interest of the meeting itself. Enter that Kenyatta Conference Centre, lose yourself in the crowd of fellow-participants, and you will inevitably find it hard to remember the 'feel' of your own little world. An Assembly is—rightly—an all-embracing and constantly fascinating experience which one can only adequately share in by opening oneself to the maximum. But there is then a real danger that one is so absorbed by it, not least by the procedural 'game' that is necessary to get a point into a committee report and on to the floor of the Assembly, then to lobby support, to follow the manoeuvres, to know when to send in one's name, etc., etc., that the moves in the game take emotional priority over what is really happening in the outside world and over the real possibilities that the churches have for action. The long battles we had at Nairobi in connection with a resolution on East Timor, fascinating in themselves at the time, look with hindsight to have illustrated this all too well.

The only way through, as far as I can see, will be by a much clearer and more generally agreed understanding of the proper *disciplines of participation* in such an Assembly. Not that these could be ever tabulated too neatly: whether rules suggested from outside or disciplines accepted from within, any general formulations must be accompanied by, and at times give place to, a Christian sensitivity, either of forbearance or of bold initiative, that will be gloriously ad hoc. Nor that I would accuse anyone in this particular Assembly of more than momentary—and understandable—indiscipline. But it might be as well if those who found the procedures frustrating were to try and set out coolly what they would consider these appropriate disciplines to be. For they are a matter not only for the delegates but also for those who delegate them and who have a real stake in the outcome. Here are a few thoughts to set the ball rolling.

Of the moderators and other officers of such a meeting is presumably required: a clear and patient knowledge of the rules, however complicated (the WCC's debt at this point to Ernest Payne is incalculable); a willingness to help delegates find the appropriate way of making their point (witness M. M. Thomas' responding eagerness to let Bishop Philip Russell of Natal put his controversial amendment to the proposal about the Programme to Combat Racism, however awkward the procedural circumstances); and an openness, via a filter such as the Assembly Business Committee, to consider promptly and publicly any complaint. On the part of the delegates a considerable measure of restraint is necessary, not to rush to speak—especially on the part of those advantaged by command of the major Assembly language and by membership of a sizeable delegation among whom various concerns can be shared out. A positive counterpart of such restraint is the will to give close attention to what others are saying and to what the reporting committee or group really intended, so as to be able to make one's own points, when necessary, with reference to those and not as out of a quite different context. More important still is the difficult sense of judging when to press one's own particular case or concern, because it deserves its place in the universal review, and when not to because it is really not of comparable importance. On the part of the delegating churches one looks to informed and realistic expectations combined with the steady will to find out from the delegates not only *what* happened but *why*, and to make the findings, however unusual or unwelcome, their own.

5. *How Was It Reported?*

THE second point, yet more important to the experience of those who did *not* attend the Assembly themselves, concerns the role of the press. The British press contingent formed, to be sure, a relatively small

proportion of the total press in attendance, but even so their work will have communicated as much or as little of the Assembly as is going to get over to many thousands more than the delegates can ever hope to reach, especially among the non-church public. Those of us who report first-hand on such an event inevitably find ourselves speaking to people whose minds are largely set, even if not entirely made up, by vague memories of the snippets they have seen in the papers or heard on the radio some weeks before. I have no quarrel with this as the basic situation, but after looking carefully into the cuttings from the Nairobi Assembly in both the daily and the church press I have a good deal to quarrel with the way this particular Assembly fared.

One underlying question is: how much attention did this Assembly deserve? Contrast for instance the coverage given to it by the *Irish Times* and the *Yorkshire Post*, neither of them represented first hand. The former gave it several substantial reports, concentrating on matters of concern to the Irish (Jack Glass's irruption, Gordon Gray's speech) or to Roman Catholics (RC membership, ordination of women). The latter gave it no more than two tiny snippets in its world miscellanea column, both episodes where British citizens were found protesting (Jack Glass and the Bishop of Truro). By what standards of responsibility can that be approved? Both *The Times* and *The Guardian* took with considerable care a decision not to send their regular church affairs correspondent but to rely on their local stringer, on the grounds that the Assembly would hardly produce enough 'hard news' for 19 days in succession to justify the expense. Perhaps not, by our present standards of what passes for hard news—but is no other sort of major concern to their readers? By contrast, the *Daily Telegraph* sent not only its regular correspondent, over whose signature some three items (approximately 15 column inches) appeared at the time, but also a roving newsman who published half a dozen items (approximately 50 inches in all) in the first few days and then sped elsewhere.

A second is this: what sort of attention is an Assembly worth? *The Times'* East Africa man, for instance, kept up an almost daily flow of relatively brief reports, but invariably highlighting some political episode. Of ten main headlines, for instance (no doubt partly the sub-editors' responsibility), three touch on controversy about racism, three on the human rights discussion, and one each on women's liberation, African leadership, the 'Western walk-out' and the condemnation of foreign intervention in Angola. Hardly the balance of the Assembly in itself. The *Church Times* editor has at least that much justification for his misrepresentation that this Assembly 'concentrated on issues of the secular world to the comparative, if not the virtual exclusion of the great questions of Christian faith, order and mission which used to be the WCC's acknowledged priorities' (despite the unequivocal evidence to the contrary of his own correspondent). The *Telegraph*, on another but even more misleading tack, almost invariably

highlighted what one or other member of the British group (usually the episcopal members of the C. of E. team) had been doing. It published more items in its gossip columns (none of any great significance) than in its news columns. Of the main addresses *The Times* gave summaries of those by Manley and Birch (brief), and Judge Jiagge and Una Kroll from the women's session, the *Telegraph* only a long one of the Coggan/Swann bible study and a brief and unsatisfactory snippet on McAfee Brown. The *Guardian* was not much better: four headlines on the Russian episode, four on the problems of the Assembly (under a cloud/clash/in the red/divisions a problem of world churches), one on the British undismayed (in fact the C. of E. team), and one on the plan for the ecumenical cooperative development society (no other British paper mentioned this imaginative scheme despite a press conference by its British director) and one recognisably to do with Christian faith. ('Churches confess own sins.') Of the main addresses only the finance report by Dr. Payne and the challenges by Buthelezi and Gray on unity were summarised. In other words, even if one had read all three of the major dailies one would have had strictly *nothing* of the reports by Thomas or Potter, nor of the main theological addresses by Argenti, Deschner or Arias and only a misleading sniff of Brown's. The Section Reports fare just as badly: nothing whatever in the *Telegraph* or *Times*, though the latter covers four of the 'political' resolutions.

That adequate and balanced reports could be made without requiring endless space was however demonstrated by the three articles which the *Guardian* took over from the *Washington Post* correspondent, Majorie Hyer (37 column inches in all). These manage to give very fair summaries of the reports of Sections I and IV, to recount objectively the first main debate on human rights in the USSR and to set admirably in perspective the elections to Presidium and Central Committee, the lack of controversy over the racism programme and the 'mild dust-up' between Philip Potter and the Archbishop of Canterbury (which was entirely on the margins of the Assembly, although *The Times* and *Telegraph* so highlighted it that many in one's audiences assume it was the major talking point at the time!). If only we could have had her full set of despatches.

The BBC, let it be said, did very much better. The two successive programmes of Anno Domini, despite the paucity of film from the Assembly itself, did an admirable job of conveying the Council and its Assembly to the relatively informed viewer. On the radio, there was a fairly continual stream of items, if more on the world service than on the British programmes. To hear the reporter concerned talk about it at the time, however, was to be struck by how he seemed above all keen on notching up the number of times he was quoted, just as in reading over the press cuttings I am struck by how much the reports give the 'average reader' what he would probably want to hear or would be entertained by. *The Times* stringer, to take a glaring instance,

sent in the entirely false story about Africans trying to take over the leadership of the Council, put out by the UPI ahead of the session in which that *could* have happened, but never subsequently denied it (as did Marjorie Hyer in the *Guardian*).

The conclusion? That a high degree of scepticism is justified about the adequacy of news reporting in even what passes for our 'quality press'. That in any case the daily press needs to be supplemented not only by the church press (which undoubtedly gave Nairobi much fuller coverage, though on occasion with even more blinkered perspectives. An all-time low mark to the editor of the *Church Times* for the carping, parochial complacency of his two editorials!) but also when possible by fuller, if slower accounts in the monthlies and quarterlies. That the churches would do well to see it as part of their membership discipline, let alone of their evangelism, to give at least an equal attention to the careful briefing and support of the press as to their own delegates. (Ought we not for instance to have raised at least part of the cost of sending the qualified men from *The Times* and *Guardian*?) More generally, that a much higher level of 'media education' and of support for reliable communicators is incumbent on every local church and on every Christian believer in an age when, like it or not, we are continuously bombarded with selective information.

6. *Evaluating an Assembly*

SO, finally, how does one evaluate an Assembly of the WCC? The question I am usually asked 'Did you enjoy it?' will hardly provide the right framework, even if to say, as I do, 'It was very hard work and often profoundly disturbing but I can't imagine a more worthwhile experience' begins to point in the right sort of direction. To ask 'Did it say what we wanted it to say?' is to set a misleadingly parochial framework, just as to ask 'was it better than earlier Assemblies?' is to assume an intimate insider's knowledge denied to all but a handful. 'Did it say anything that makes sense?' points to an answer that will depend very largely on where he or she stands who has to make sense of it. No, the only adequate sort of question is this: 'Does the Assembly provide us here with an agenda and a context that will give greater depth and truth to what we have already learnt of Christ?' On some points it may fail to: I have already mentioned that the eucharistic liturgies experienced at Nairobi were less adequate, less renewed than either Series 2 or 3. On other points it may be that our agenda has not yet stretched to include something of importance at the world level. But such a question cannot allow for quick judgments of what was good or bad—those only reflect on the judges. It is a question that requires careful thought, and thought about what we are doing or not doing here and now as much as about what the Assembly did or did

not do in Nairobi. It is a question which it can properly take any church three or four years to digest before expecting to begin to face the next one.

Above all it is a question that points to that interaction between the universal and the local which is what an Assembly, like the WCC as a whole, is all about. What is the norm against which we measure our Christian obedience? The teachings of Jesus Christ, as witnessed in scripture? Of course, but we know that they do not refer directly to our contemporary puzzles? The high points of our own tradition and heritage? In practice, this is surely where many Christians in this country look, and we do right to cherish their memory. Yet now that the church is a universal reality in geographical and cultural fact as well as in faith, our own traditions cannot adequately supply the norm for the global task in the local setting. The nascent experience of the WCC—it is after all not yet 30 years old—and within it the built-in high points of the successive Assemblies, provide us and all the churches with common points of reference, to challenge and renew into witnessing unity, that any of us, group or congregation or synod, neglect at the peril of our standing in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in which we say, Sunday by Sunday, we believe.

One of the best moments of Nairobi for me, sitting mute in an interpreter's box, was to hear Lukas Vischer, chief secretary of the WCC Faith and Order Commission, introduce to a sub-committee the question of a common date for Easter. You will remember, he said, that when the churches met at Nicaea it was agreed that Easter should fall . . . and at the Council of Trent the practice that had grown up in the West in previous centuries . . . in 1977 the two Easters of the Julian and Gregorian calendars will coincide once again . . . the Ecumenical Patriarch has issued an appeal . . . the Pope has let it be known that the Vatican would be willing . . . a great majority of the Reformation churches have responded favourably. . . . Even so, it was impossible to reach a final agreement! (The Orthodox insisted on their need to work it out with one another first.) But here was the true scope of the catholicity of the church, in time as well as in space, taking up—warts and all—the various experiences and various desires of the different strands into which the church is divided, with intent to hold together, to renew, to make witness, towards a decision which we there in that sub-committee could prepare for the Assembly to recommend to the churches as its reasonable worship. We didn't by any means always articulate this scope, but that in principle was what the Nairobi Assembly—the most representative meeting of the church since Pentecost—was doing all the time. It is in no lesser light that it deserves to be judged.

¹ Kosuke Koyama of Japan, author of *Waterbuffalo Theology*, SCM Press.

² Echoing, probably unconsciously, words that Archbishop Söderblom had used almost twenty years earlier in preparing for the 1925 Stockholm Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work: Rouse and Neill (eds.) *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, London: SPCK, 1967, pp. 704 and 533f.