

protesting groups who picketed the main public event in the Pacific Coliseum and reappeared intermittently on the campus where the Assembly was housed. They were mostly fundamentalist groups such as that led by Pastor Jack Glass from Glasgow and Carl McIntyre's International Council of Christian Churches. They were not well-briefed. I saw one poster saying "Thiemmen was appointed by the KGB". I asked the protester who Thiemmen was. He didn't know. I think he must have meant Pimen. Another protester, when asked for evidence of his assertions, replied "I don't know. They gave me five bucks to stand here". Protest at this level of ignorance and incompetence helps no one. The most bizarre and well-financed group was The Club of Life, simultaneously supporting the economic theories and political ambitions of Lyndon H. La Rouché, advocating beam weapons, contending for the *Filioque*, warning against the pretensions of Moscow as the Third Rome and maintaining, in contrast to others, that it is the KGB which is a tool of the Russian Orthodox Church, not the other way round. Rather flatteringly, it claimed in an open appeal that only the Anglican Church could save the situation. Crude dirty tricks, like impersonation, caricature and the issuing of forged documents, did nothing for the reputation of the fringe which was treated with bemused tolerance by the majority of delegates. The true interests of believers in Eastern Europe

were not furthered by the demonstrations at Vancouver and I came away more than ever convinced that bodies like Keston College must steer clear of the hatred, bigotry and lunacy of groups like these, while continuing to concentrate on hard evidence and verifiable facts.

By contrast the Geneva-based Christian Solidarity International, which held a conference on the Persecuted Church in Vancouver during the Assembly, sought and found discussion rather than confrontation. Its president, the Revd Hans Stückerberger, met Philip Potter, the General Secretary of the WCC, and presented a petition containing 15,500 signatures of European churchmen asking the WCC to take concrete measures in demanding freedom of faith, not only in communist countries but also in Latin America, Egypt and South Africa.

There is still much to be hoped for in co-operation with the World Council of Churches, particularly now that religious freedom is back on the agenda. The real challenge is to member Churches. We must leave to the judgement of the churches in Eastern Europe themselves whether the time really is ripe "to lift the veil of silence" and we must encourage our Churches to back financially and in other ways the Human Rights programmes which our representatives have asked for.

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The Yakunin Hearing: A Call for Solidarity

Disarmament, women's rights, dialogue with other faiths (Hinduism, Islam, etc.), the general struggle for human rights, hunger and poverty — few were surprised when these issues dominated the proceedings and action of the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) when it convened 24 July in Vancouver. However, the absence of significant action dealing with persecution, oppression or the state-imposed suffering which, according to reliable estimates is a reality for almost half of Christendom, sent waves of dismay and concern through many quarters.

Christians in the Soviet Union reacted when the persecuted and suffering Church was not included as a major agenda item; several protest letters reached assembly delegates. Meanwhile, in Vancouver, the

Zürich-based organisation Christian Solidarity International (CSI) challenged the WCC to examine fully and act upon the persecution issue and its implications for Christians today. As part of a conference named after imprisoned Russian Orthodox priest Gleb Yakunin, CSI brought fourteen authorities on the subject to Vancouver.

One of the letters reaching WCC delegates came from the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR, a group formed by Yakunin. The communiqué basically reinforced a letter written by Yakunin and Lev Regelson and addressed to the WCC's Fifth Assembly which met in Nairobi in 1975. Yakunin's appeal was never fully acted upon by the WCC, according to CSI and many observers.

In a further appeal to the Vancouver Assembly, translated by Keston College, Deacon Vladimir Rusak of the Russian Orthodox Church pleaded for frank discussion on the points in Yakunin's previous letter. Rusak, from Moscow, had worked in the editorial office of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* until it was learned that he was writing a book which would chronicle the history of the Russian Orthodox Church since 1917.

The points made by Yakunin and Rusak and underscored by Yakunin's current five-year prison sentence* were emphasised at the "Yakunin Hearing", as the First CSI World Conference on the Persecuted Church was called. Yakunin's actions on behalf of religious freedom before his arrest were very public, and included the Nairobi letter and several subsequent appeals to WCC General Secretary Dr Philip Potter.

Another appeal for action to be taken on behalf of Yakunin and the many oppressed Christians in the Soviet Union came from Nobel Literature laureatè Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who sent a message which was read at the Yakunin Hearing. Solzhenitsyn called upon conference participants to express "indignation" at the Soviet government's treatment of an "upright" priest like Yakunin.

At the opening session of the Yakunin Hearing, CSI's International President, the Rev. Hans J. Stükelberger, a Reformed Church pastor, stressed the need for solidarity amongst all Christians, particularly those who suffer persecution. Quoting Yakunin, Stükelberger told WCC delegates, Christians from the local Vancouver area and a handful of media representatives that "we often forget that the persecuted and the martyrs are the seeds of the Church". During the six-day conference (22-27 July 1983), various speakers elaborated on this theme and focused upon specific problems in Africa, in Asia, in Central America and in the area said to be the most neglected by the WCC: Eastern Europe and other Marxist nations.

Dr Aradom Tedla, a former high-ranking Ethiopian government official who fled the country in 1980, told how the present Marxist regime has moved to control and eventually eliminate the Church. Dr Tedla

asked WCC delegates to remember, in particular, one of its former Central Committee members and host to a Central Committee meeting, the Orthodox Patriarch Abuna Theophilos. Arrested by Ethiopian secret police in 1976, Theophilos remains missing, though no criminal charges have been brought against him.

Other pleas came from Dr Humberto Belli, a former Sandinista rebel and Nicaraguan journalist; from Ioan Moldovan, an exiled Romanian Christian activist; from Tat'yana Goricheva, an expelled Soviet writer and active Orthodox layperson; from Peter Elks, a Cambodian refugee worker, and from Dr Nico Smith, a South African Reformed clergyman.

Emphasising the significance of martyrdom, the German theologian Professor Dr Peter Beyerhaus of Tübingen University asserted that more persecution of Christians has taken place in the twentieth century than at any other time in history. He said that not only does martyrdom cause suffering, but it also builds up the body of Christ. Martyrdom, he explained, "belongs to the nature of Christ's Church, brings great blessing to Christ's Church and calls for un-failing solidarity of Christ's Church".

Examining persecution from another angle, David Atkinson, a member of the British Parliament and the Council of Europe, told more than five hundred people at the conference that his experience with human rights issues and Eastern European governments indicates that full and public solidarity with the persecuted does have a tremendous impact and influences governments. Atkinson, who met Yakunin during one visit to Moscow, agreed with the imprisoned priest that Soviet delegates sent to Vancouver come with tainted objectivity and therefore do not truly represent Russian Christians. Russian church officials, he said, are appointed by the atheistic Soviet government and must report back to that same government.

In response, WCC leaders repeated what they have said for years. Reluctant to take a public stand, they instead insist that private "diplomatic" approaches in Eastern Europe will do the job. As proof, the group published letters sent to the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church on behalf of Yakunin and the Vashchenko and Chmykhalov families. (The latter case had been resolved just days before the opening of the WCC Assembly when the last of the

*To be followed by five years' internal exile; sentence runs from 1 November 1979 — Ed.

"Siberian Seven" group was permitted to emigrate.) However, the role claimed by the WCC in that case was questioned by Lynn Buzzard of the Siberian Seven Working Group, who said that at no time during the campaign to obtain emigration for the Pentecostals had the WCC offered encouragement or financial assistance.

In a meeting with CSI representatives, the WCC General Secretary, Dr Philip Potter, pledged that the persecution issue would be raised in various sub-committees, but he would not promise it would be a major conference issue. Potter also accepted a letter from CSI and a petition which called upon the WCC to take specific actions, including public support, direct aid, recognition of problems in the East and in the West and regular prayer for the oppressed. Rev. Stückelberger maintained that the Yakunin Hearing was designed to

encourage dialogue with WCC delegates and not as an anti-WCC forum. He underscored the need for specific and clear language: "Persecution must be called persecution. If one only calls it 'problems' then one is not facing the significance of martyrdom." CSI's closing statement further warned that "a Church which betrays its martyrs risks eventually betraying Christ".

The WCC did have an impalpable and vague final statement on human rights which the Assembly plenary session adopted. While the words "persecution" and "oppression" were used, the application was not defined. Furthermore, although strongly-worded statements on Central America and sexism were issued, Eastern Europe was not included in any of the major declarations.

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