



‘What Becomes Possible In That Place’: Reflections on Ecumenical Location

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Some years ago, I was invited to be the preacher at a Churches Together anniversary service in a cathedral somewhere in England. Great care had obviously been taken to make the liturgy as participative and creative as possible, the music was good as well as lively and the prayers direct and heartfelt. But if the soundtrack had been switched off, what the passing observer would have seen was a long chancel stretching into the distance with an altar barely visible from the nave where the congregation were seated. At the top of the chancel steps, in a line right across the church, were ten chairs, in which sat ten late-middle-aged white men in an assortment of ecclesiastical garb. In the crossing, alone between the people and the thin line, side on to the action, sat the preacher somewhat uncomfortably wondering what the spatial arrangements were really communicating. I am quite sure that it was not intentional, but the church leaders looked for all the world like they were defending a bridgehead, preparing for a last stand in case the congregation might rush the altar.

I am always interested in the shape of things, and in what our spatial relationships suggest about how we inhabit the world. One of the most significant effects of wealth, for example, is its maximising the space between human beings while minimising distance from services and utilities. At the centre of the World Council of Churches 9th General Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, was the Assembly Hall, where the official delegates of the member churches sat in air-conditioned comfort, assisted by an excellent sound system, simultaneous translation and a documentation service. Also having access to the Assembly Hall, though seated near the back, were the representatives of world communions, regional ecumenical bodies, global agencies, international Christian movements, special advisors and the media. Here took place all the business and policy sessions, and the thematic plenaries.

Beyond this central space was the *Mutirão*, described as ‘a space open to any person, congregation or organization wishing to accompany the Assembly in a spirit of ecumenical sharing, celebration and formation.’ This was a physical space of meeting rooms, lecture halls, cafés, corners and corridors, and, just outside the Assembly Hall itself, a vast exhibition area crammed with stands, displays, artwork, banners, literature, resources of every kind, a ‘marketplace’ of possibilities, information and activism. It was also, of course, a spiritual and intellectual space, offering workshops and seminars, cultural events and exhibits to all participants in the Assembly, self-programming and subject to no formal agenda or interpretation. Where the Assembly Hall was calm, intent and orderly, the *Mutirão* was a cacophony of conversation, shouts, music, performance, oratory, prayer, weeping, drumming, clattering, video presentations on permanent replay, and a hundred languages struggling to be heard and understood. It was a blaze of colour, costume, gesticulation, movement and passion. The energy and excitement was evident and infectious.

On the campus itself, there was a third ring (apart from the staff who normally work there). These were the traders, those people given permission (and perhaps some who just got in anyway) to set up stalls selling crafts, artefacts, clothes and other goods, who were mostly indigenous people, taking advantage of this large global gathering, at least some of whom had money to spend, to do a bit of good business.

And finally, beyond the campus, the city of Porto Alegre, used to hosting international events, some much bigger than the Assembly, going about its daily life. These events bring income into the city, and Assembly participants also took the opportunity to do tourist things, and to engage with its cultural and social reality; probably the biggest single engagement was on Assembly Sunday, when thousands of people worshipped in local churches.



The concentric shape of the ecumenical movement

Anyone who has attended an international ecumenical event will recognise this shape, these circles spreading outwards. But I think it's also recognisably the shape of the modern ecumenical movement as a whole. I want to think about the relationship between these circles, and some of the challenges and possibilities it represents. It is a truism at present to suggest that ecumenism is most vibrant and active in the second circle, in the *Mutirão* not just of the Assembly but of the whole church. Here, where the emphasis is on practical Christianity, in pastoral care, peacemaking, justice and the struggle for human rights, the integrity of creation, the familiar slogan 'doctrine divides, service unites' seems self-evident. George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community, said 'only a demanding common task builds community', and it is the experience of many, locally as well as internationally, that ecumenism comes naturally to women working together on strategies to overcome domestic abuse, to aid agencies seeking to respond to global disaster and poverty, to groups campaigning and advocating on every aspect of human and environmental concern imaginable.

It is hard to say where this global *Mutirão* begins and ends because the boundaries are blurred. The last couple of decades have been marked by an increasing convergence over social justice issues of formerly unlikely partners, both within and beyond the churches. And the place where this convergence so often takes place, at a practical ongoing level beyond the symbolic representational one, is within the global *Mutirão*. This circle is the part most engaged in civic society, the public meeting ground between secular and religious.

The strengths of this circle are visible. It is ecumenical in a broad sense. Because its focus is outside its own existence and internal workings, directed towards what are sometimes described as 'kingdom' rather than 'church' concerns, its inclusiveness is one of those who share praxis, and it is tolerant of doctrinal differences, in which anyway it has less investment than those holding denominational power. Nevertheless, it is important not to assume a greater polarisation between the Assembly Hall and the *Mutirão*, between the churches



concerned with doctrinal issues and denominational negotiations and the world-facing activists concerned with social engagement, between faith and order and life and work if you like, than there actually is. The relationship between them is more complex than that.

That the activists were present in Porto Alegre at all, far less in strength, suggests a recognition of the importance of the churches to their own effectiveness. This is in the first place, I think, because they are always, in every context, a minority. However much we might wish it were otherwise, the majority of people are too uninterested, too cynical or mostly just too caught up with the necessities of daily life and survival in a globalised world to dedicate much time to the effort of changing it for the better. Churches are an important point of access and authorisation to the local, to the city, if you like, offer possibilities for grassroots education and mobilisation and help to shape the cultural context for political change. But that depends in turn on the kind of doctrinal direction and spiritual formation given by the churches.

For example, all churches would probably agree with the first of the Millennium Development Goals: *‘eradicate extreme poverty and hunger’*. However, their approaches to other of the Goals, such as *‘promote gender equality and empower women’* or *‘combat HIV/AIDS’* will vary hugely, for better or worse, according to their doctrinal direction and spiritual formation, and will directly affect local responses across the world. Activists know they must bring their perspective to the discussions of churches. This is one of the reasons that such a high percentage of WCC funding now comes, not from the churches themselves but from global agencies and specialist ministries. But this relationship is not without its challenges.



Identity and mission

One of the key motivations for the process on the Reconfiguration of the Ecumenical Movement, in which the Iona Community has been a participant, has been the frustration felt by the agencies at the unwieldy nature of ecumenical structures and the extreme slowness

of responsive action this causes, at the proliferation of new ones and the cost and duplication of programmes this engenders. As the Final Statement from the Consultation on *Ecumenism in the 21st Century* puts it:

15. The process of moving towards a new configuration of the ecumenical movement is urgent. Financial difficulties in many churches put pressure on the ecumenical movement to reconsider how it works. But the needs coming from a changing world also ask for a common agenda, which harnesses collective energies to work together for the healing of the world. Moreover, a need is felt for more effective instruments in the quest for Christian unity given the changing landscape of Christianity.

16. A new configuration of the ecumenical movement will require change from our churches and our organizations. Structures are needed which are less rigid, more flexible, and which lead us to develop more collaborative initiatives with each other. Beyond structures, we seek to change the way we work and to find more creative and innovative opportunities for working together.¹

This is the context which has shaped the resolve that in the coming years, the WCC should ‘do less, do it well, in an integrated, collaborative and interactive approach’, and to the focussing on four key areas of engagement: unity, spirituality and mission; ecumenical formation focusing on youth in particular; global justice; and bringing a credible voice and prophetic witness to the world.

The phrase ‘a credible voice’ is a clue to a dominant theme within the Assembly Hall (and the global Assembly Hall) regarding Christian identity and religious plurality in a rapidly changing world where many Christians live as minorities, in the midst of either non-Christian religions or indifferent or even hostile secular societies. The Irish Catholic theologian Donal Dorr has described a shift from a

‘sending-out and gathering-in’ theology of mission, whereby all the world was to be drawn into Christian commitment and fellowship, so fulfilling the mission of the church to transform the secular world into a Christian world, to a much more dialogical model, in which “The dialogue is not a matter of doing things **for** people. It is first of all a matter of being **with** people, of listening and sharing with them.” This changed world is

- *A world where we also look for and find the Spirit at work outside the present boundaries of the church*
- *A world where there is a genuine pluralism and where we respect, appreciate and learn from the religious beliefs of others*
- *A world where the Christian message is no longer identified with Western civilisation, and vice versa, and where we see many ways in which non-Christian cultures may be far closer than our own to the Christian vision and values*
- *A world where we have an integrated concept of human liberation and development*
- *A world where patriarchal values and models of thought and action are being questioned and where we are called to give the feminine its full value*
- *A world where the missionary can no longer be a ‘lone ranger’ but has to work co-operatively, as part of a team.*²

This model was inspiringly located within a strong Christology by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in his address to the Assembly:

Christian identity is to belong in a place that Jesus defines for us. By living in that place, we come in some degree to share his identity, to bear his name and to be in the same relationships he has with God and with the world. Forget ‘Christianity’ for a moment – Christianity as a system of ideas competing with others in the market:

concentrate on the place in the world that is the place of Jesus the anointed, and what it is that becomes possible in that place.

There is a difference between seeing the world as basically a territory where systems compete, where groups with different allegiances live at each other's expense, where rivalry is inescapable, and seeing the world as a territory where being in a particular place makes it possible for you to see, to say and to do certain things that aren't possible elsewhere. The claim of Christian belief is not first and foremost that it offers the only accurate system of thought, as against all other competitors; it is that, by standing in the place of Christ, it is possible to live in such intimacy with God that no fear or failure can ever break God's commitment to us, and to live in such a degree of mutual gift and understanding that no human conflict or division need bring us to uncontrollable violence and mutual damage. From here, you can see what you need to see to be at peace with God and with God's creation; and also what you need to be at peace with yourself, acknowledging your need of mercy and re-creation.³

But while this may be a fair representation of a broad mission consensus within the ecumenical movement, the devil is in the detail. The 'sending-out and gathering-in' model is far from dead, and is a cause of great tension all over the world; not just between Christianity and other religions, but within Christianity itself. And one of the consequences of economic globalisation has been to push those marginalized by its indifference to human suffering into fundamentalist ideologies that are anything but pluralist and mutually respectful.

In contexts in which mission as proclamation is difficult or impossible, the mission that is *diakonia*, accompaniment and prophetic witness is all the more important. Though churches have sometimes been slightly dismissive of their activists (notwithstanding their role as instigators,

practitioners and now funders of the modern ecumenical movement), and have seen them as enthusiastic idealists who need to be kept under control, the churches also know they need them. Though they may sit more lightly to institutional and denominational structures, the global *Mutirão* is nevertheless an authentic and crucial expression of being church. It is an embodiment of service, and the striving for justice and peace. And it is often the place where the prophetic witness arises.



A community of conflict

Since the credible voice is predicated on a degree of ecclesiastical unity and the prophetic voice is by its very nature radical and divisive, the very fact of linking the two together in one area of engagement creates an inbuilt tension, even conflict. At the 8th WCC Assembly in Harare, I heard Nelson Mandela speak in the most eloquent tones about the importance of the WCC Programme to Combat Racism in South Africa's long march to freedom. But the disagreement, disunity and even disengagement by churches from the WCC itself that this undoubtedly prophetic witness caused was unparalleled. The same tension, though perhaps to a lesser degree, was evident within the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, which, hugely important for gender relations within the churches, was distinguished by a great deal more solidarity of women with women across the world than by solidarity by churches with women.

But that inbuilt tension is not necessarily a bad thing. It is the sign of a movement that is *in* the world, with all its tensions and conflicts, and not in some fantasy realm of Christian triumphalism or ungrounded spiritual escapism. The life of the city is one of tension and conflict. One of the most important gifts that the ecumenical movement has to offer to the city is in its capacity to model being a community of conflict. One of the major global challenges of the 21st century is how we are to live with difference? For indeed, we must find ways to live together in peace, though we are different, because there are no good alternatives. We have seen the way of separation and division; in Northern Ireland, behind the ironically titled 'peace lines'; in the Balkans; in apartheid South Africa, in Israel/Palestine. This is not a

good alternative. We have seen the way of ethnic cleansing, of warfare, of genocide. This is an even worse alternative, a many-headed hydra that breeds more death.

People are different, and will remain different. But the gospel witness is that we can love each other, though we are different. In this context, the programme of the Decade to Overcome Violence is crucial. But also important is the movement, begun at the prompting of the Orthodox churches, towards consensus decision-making in the WCC. For real community, differences have to be confronted and worked through, in a way which both goes beyond win/lose, us/them outcomes, and refuses to settle for a false peace. Communities where there is no conflict are either operating at a fairly superficial level, or one voice or perspective is controlling, and sometimes intimidating everyone else. A mature consensual process offers the freedom to ask questions, to challenge, to disagree, to be different, but still to remain in relationship, always turning to face one another in mutual love. This I understand to be at least part of what is meant by ‘reconciled diversity.’

The importance of the ecumenical movement generally, and the WCC specifically, in offering the kind of privileged, safe and fertile space for this kind of encounter and process is exemplified for me in the WCC discussions on human sexuality, which have been able to avoid the divisions currently convulsing the Anglican communion while still confronting the serious differences which exist in this presenting issue (which reflects huge theological and ecclesiastical differences in everything from understandings of scripture through religious plurality to the political, economic and cultural effects of globalisation). These discussions are limited in their impact, a small fragile flower of integrity and reconciliation not of ideas but of people, growing amidst a wasteland of fear and misunderstanding. But the process itself need not be limited in its impact.

The extent to which churches can work together is a continuum, with human sexuality probably the point of greatest disagreement. The area of greatest agreement is around issues of poverty and inequality, which

has seen an unparalleled mobilisation of Christians around the world, in partnership with people of goodwill of every religion and none, in campaigning, advocacy, practical service and political engagement at every level, from the local churches taking part in the Make Poverty History campaign (and its equivalent in other parts of the world) to the Global Call for Action and the Trade Justice Movement and the significant theological work done by the world communions, such as the Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth process of WARC, and by the WCC itself in its AGAPE document. This growing convergence of concern was all the more emphasised in Porto Alegre by the presence of so many Latin American Roman Catholics and Pentecostals in the *Mutirão*, there because of their participation in the struggle for economic justice in their continent. Whatever their ecclesiological differences, the ‘Kairos of grace’ referred to by Graham McGeoch in his reading of the 9th Assembly of and from Latin America is a testament to the power of the gospel call of God from the midst of the poor to transform church relations.

But for me, the presence of the market traders in the circle between the Assembly and the city was a silent reminder of the ambiguities even within the ecumenical movement regarding the complicity with unjust structures we are all born into, and the degree to which certainly in Europe and North America we are prepared to dissent from our complicity, our original sin, when it profits us so well. That will ultimately depend not on our social programmes and doctrinal policies but on our openness to transformation by God’s grace. And the capacity of ordinary church members in the city of the world for resistance and persistence in the face of violence and injustice, and for partnership and the breaking down of ecumenical barriers will not depend on theological analysis or official exhortation but on spirituality.



A movement of the Spirit

The lasting – and transforming – effect of participation in something like the Assembly, or other global Christian gatherings is actually that

of recognising that the ecumenical movement is above all a movement not of the churches but of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the source of all unity. All attraction, all bonding, all intimacy and communion flows from the Spirit. Each of these relationships is sacred to the Spirit, who inspires all fruitfulness and creativity, the signs of true bonding and intimacy. From the Spirit comes the great urge to heal what is broken, re-unite what is separated and recreate the face of the earth. ⁴

Overall, I found the worship of the Assembly less personally satisfying than the interconfessional liturgies of other gatherings. But the intimacy of Pentecostal worship, the truly global and creative eucharistic celebration in the Anglican cathedral in Porto Alegre, reading the Bible with the most diverse group of people I will ever have the privilege of sitting down with, singing, praying, sharing meals and on occasion tears with both strangers and friends in small encounters – these I will always remember as Spirit-filled.

There is a conversion of the deep will to God that cannot be effected in words—barely in a gesture or ceremony. There is a conversion of the deep will and a gift of my substance that is too mysterious for liturgy, and too private. ⁵

My own spiritual formation has been thoroughly ecumenical. I grew up in an Edinburgh housing scheme in the heady days around the Second Vatican Council, as a Presbyterian celebrating the festivals of the Christian Year with Catholics and Episcopalians, but also taking part in regular shared worship just because it was good to worship together. Equally important was the conviviality of parties, shared meals and other social activities. St Mark's and St Hilda's were almost as familiar to me as St John's. There were study groups and house churches, ecumenical pilgrimages and holidays. There was united action on community issues. Most importantly for me as a teenager, there was the ecumenical youth group, set up with a focus on justice and peace.

This formation was nurtured by the Iona Community, deepened in ecumenical women's movements and extended by a working life of intense engagement with other churches. I worked for ecumenical bodies, in a Baptist church for three years, in the Presbyterian Church of Mauritius and lived in two ecumenical intentional communities. I have been a consultant or resource person to the World Council of Churches, the 1998 Lambeth Conference, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World YMCA, and many regional, national and local churches and ecumenical bodies. I have observed the ecumenical movement from many angles, including on my hands and knees! (It may be that my musings on the ecumenical shape are the result of my slight shock at finding myself inside the Assembly Hall as the Iona Community's Delegated Representative, able to sit in comfort to listen to the keynote speeches and in possession of the coveted blue badge of access, instead of crawling around the back of a large tent passing a microphone from one group of marginalized people to another, which was my outstanding experience of the 8th Assembly).

I continue to be convinced of the importance of ecumenism in the life of churches and in the life of the world. For the Iona Community, whose members are drawn from ten different Christian denominations and from many countries, the commitment to ecumenical formation is both a necessity and an enduring source of life and creativity. It is our spiritual habitat. It is where we discover that we can indeed love each other though we are different, where we experience God's transforming grace. We find within this formation

- the belief that the Spirit of God is with us in our search and struggles, in solidarity with other committed people, for a model of life that respects people and shows care for the environment
- a legacy of fundamental values which make up the social teaching of the churches
- a long history of experience of change and adapting to the new

- the inspiration, wisdom and energy of significant numbers of people who are committed to Jesus' work of justice and love.

But ecumenical formation doesn't just happen. It requires clergy and church leaders who do not just exhort mutual respect, but model it, and encourage openness, learning and discovery, and a whole church community which is offered the opportunity to value simple things like spending time together, celebrating together, witnessing and praying together. Neglect of the potential richness and diversity of ecumenical formation is, I believe, a contributing factor in the current somewhat emaciated state of Scottish Christian spirituality.

In an address to the 8th Assembly in Harare that has been bread for my journey, Kosuke Koyama said:

*The one God embraces the one world, which speaks more than 7000 dialects and languages. God is open to all cultures and nations. How many languages does God speak? All of them! No people can speak in an isolated language and have an exclusive self-identity. [...] The church is in the world and the world is in the church. God's word to the church is God's word to the world. There are not two words of God, one for the church and another for the world*⁶

- ¹ *Report of the Consultation, Ecumenism in the 21st Century* (WCC: Geneva, 2004).
- ² Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today's World* (Columba Press, Dublin 2000).
- ³ *9th Assembly Plenary on Christian identity and religious plurality: Address by Rowan Williams*.
- ⁴ Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth: A Call to a New Theology* (Cassell: London 1986).
- ⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Sheldon Press: London, 1976).
- ⁶ *8th Assembly Address by Kosuke Koyama*.