



Porto Alegre and After

Norman J Shanks

As I start writing, we have just had, in mid-June, ‘Seeds of Hope’, the Scottish churches’ ecumenical gathering in Perth. It was a good event, and there was a thoroughly interesting programme of talks, conversations and workshops and an impressive display of stalls reflecting a very wide spectrum of Scottish church life. The attendance was at least respectable, but I suspect the organisers were hoping for more. Nonetheless it was an occasion for sowing and acknowledging the many seeds of hope that are to be discerned in Scotland today – within, on the edge of, even outside the activities of the churches and church-related organisations.

Three months ago in February around twenty of us from Scotland had the privilege of taking part in the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Its scale was altogether different from the Perth gathering with around 4000 present – 750 official delegates together with representatives of non-member churches and associated organisations, observers, advisers, WCC staff and almost 3000 ‘non-core participants’ who were included in the bulk of activities and events.

This is not the place to try to give any kind of account, even a summary, of what happened during our ten days in Porto Alegre – except to say that it appears to have been a wonderfully memorable experience for most of those who were there, not so much because of the ‘official business’, the reflection on all sorts of topics of relevance to the churches in the world today, not even because of the enriching worship and Bible study, but above all because of the opportunities for a remarkable range of people from all over the world and from every church tradition to engage and interact with one another. What encouragement we all gained from our strong sense of solidarity and belonging together in the faith; and how much we learned about the difficult and demanding situations in which people are witnessing so faithfully and courageously!

Inevitably after such an experience one feels frustrated by one's inability to share fully with others the scope, richness and depth of the experience – what it was really like; inevitably too one questions whether all the cost and effort were worthwhile and what significance the Assembly has for the life of the churches and for individual church members in their local situations. Clearly it was an important milestone for the World Council itself, determining priorities and directions for the next seven years or so, until the next Assembly, whose timing and location are not yet determined. But there is continuing frustration also, despite all the best attempts, about the difficulty of effectively communicating the concerns of the WCC, disseminating the excellent material and resources produced by it, indeed promoting awareness of its very existence in such a way as to permeate and enhance the life of the churches at grass-roots. And this of course is a problem not particular to the WCC but endemic to the whole ecumenical movement. The same issues apply at all levels: the work also of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, of the Conference of European Churches, of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, even of Action of Churches Together, scarcely touches the consciousness of the average Church of Scotland member, and if it does it is perceived as remote and of little relevance to immediate and local concerns. This is true, I am certain, across all the denominations – and yet these ecumenical bodies are not 'them', but 'us': they have no significance without the committed involvement of the individual denominations.

The theme of the Porto Alegre Assembly was 'God, in your grace, transform the world'. It emerged from fairly tortuous discussions, and, to be honest, when it was decided on, I was not convinced that we had made the right choice: I felt that it did not grab one's attention sufficiently; there was an apparent lack of any kind of 'cutting-edge'. But on further reflection, and with the hindsight of the Assembly experience, I have changed my mind, and now think that this theme was thoroughly appropriate for the World Council, and for the ecumenical movement generally, at this particular time. It is not a bold, assertive statement like some of the themes and titles of previous assemblies, confidently proclaiming, for instance, 'Jesus Christ, the Light of the World'. It is more modest, cast deliberately in the form of a prayer,

acknowledging both the world's need for change and our reliance on God if this is to come about. It is hopeful too, of course, in recognising the possibility of change, and the use of the preposition 'in' (rather than 'by' or 'through') is intentional, thus affirming that we have a part to play in the process of transformation.

The Porto Alegre Assembly, both in the formal programme and in the fringe events, certainly offered ample opportunity to explore the needs of the world, the difficult issues with which churches are grappling in many different countries, and the demanding situations in which they are often witnessing. It was an occasion for solidarity and sharing, for reflecting on the past, facing up to the challenges of the present, and planning for the future. Through the worship and the Bible study, through all the formal speeches and the informal conversations, through the laughter and the tears, we were expressing our conviction that 'another world is possible', and affirming that the ecumenical movement, and the individual churches as part of that, have a critical role in bringing it about.

The world of the twenty-first century, and the place of the church in the world, are of course very different from the early days of the ecumenical movement. The 1910 Edinburgh conference, all the steps and processes that led up to the formation of the World Council at the Amsterdam Assembly of 1948, took place against a very different back-cloth from that against which we now lead our lives. There have been two world wars, and other significant conflicts too numerous to mention. The breaking up of the British Commonwealth and Empire, the formation of the European Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the 'Cold War', the recent development of American neo-imperialism have significantly affected political and social patterns from a European perspective, let alone events and trends (and in particular the current emergence of China as a 'super-power') in other parts of the world. Forces such as economic globalisation and the rise of the powerful trans-national corporations, and technological developments, not least in the fields of weaponry, electronic communications and information technology, have radically altered lives in every nation.

And there has been a dramatic shift in the place of the church in the world. When the World Council was founded in 1948 (somewhat delayed by the outbreak of war in Europe), following considerable co-operation among the churches in the fields of ‘faith and order’ and ‘life and work’, it was dominated by the churches of western Europe and North America; and, despite the significant contribution of laymen like J.R. Mott and J.H. Oldham, the people in the photographs from these early days are mostly male clerics. The theme of the first assembly – ‘Man’s disorder and God’s design’ – reflected well the prevailing mood at the time, upbeat, confident and optimistic, tinged however with a measure of repentance and realism. Over the years since then the mood has rather changed. The post-war dreams and aspirations have not been fulfilled. Despite all the technological advances and material progress, there is still much conflict, suffering and need in today’s world. The United Nations, for all its achievements, has not fulfilled the original hopes that it would be an effective force for international peace, reconciliation and justice. The gulf between the ‘developed’ North and the ‘developing’ South seems to widen inexorably. With the so-called ‘secularisation’ of society and the development of post-modern culture, in many countries in Europe and North America the influence of the churches has been reduced, and faith has come to be perceived as a private matter, concerning personal choice rather than objective eternal truth that has public significance. At the same time as the position of the churches of the ‘North’, for so long the bulwarks of the ecumenical movement, has arguably become weaker, socially and politically, and in terms of numbers and therefore financially, there has been remarkable growth among the churches of the ‘South’ – both among the mainstream denominations and the independent Pentecostal and ‘Evangelical’ churches.

And even in the ‘North’ it is not as if people have stopped believing in God – if the consistent evidence of opinion polls, census data and the like (and, at a very local and personal level, of conducting funerals for ‘non-church’ families) is to be trusted, or that people never ask deep questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and of their own lives. The sense of the transcendent may be less well-defined than in previous generations, as the Archbishop of York recently suggested;

‘God-consciousness’ may be less pronounced within people’s natural mindset and daily existence; but many today are still restless, seeking a contentment that is better, fuller, deeper and more lasting beyond the transitory pleasures and illusory fulfillment brought by a successful career and the acquisition of wealth. In our bookshops the ‘Mind, Body and Spirit’ section far outstrips the ‘Religious’ one; and psychic fairs and workshops on spirituality have become something of a growth industry. There is a danger of course in ‘spirituality’ being seen as just another commodity in the marketplace of possibilities, a product to be tried out in today’s pick-and-mix society rather than a fundamental dimension of human identity. It is unfortunate too that for many people the search for meaning seems to be about *escaping* from the pressures and tensions of life rather than exploring ways of *engaging* with and discovering life in all its fullness. And the special challenge facing the churches, in carrying forward their mission and witness, is that, in pursuing their spiritual quest, people are seldom looking to traditional religion or institutional Christianity, too often perceived as steeped in an alien culture, archaic, remote and irrelevant to modern needs. And in this context, to the increasing number of people with little live church connection, the divisions and distinctions among the churches, whether denominational or theological, are likely to be regarded as at least confusing and at worst thoroughly off-putting.

Another significant factor, evident world-wide within both the traditional Christian churches and other faiths, has been the substantial growth of a conservative approach to scripture and morality (not always ‘Fundamentalist’ in the literal or literalist sense): this has been both divisive within denominations and an obstacle to building bridges between denominations. There is also growing evidence of a phenomenon which might be described as ‘creeping congregationalism’, a communal reflection perhaps of the individualistic and consumerist ethos of our times: the church is there essentially to provide a service to meet people’s personal need for worship and fellowship; so many church members have little or no interest in the wider work of the church, whether denominational or ecumenical, national or international. (And it is of course, if only at first sight, thoroughly paradoxical that as communications and so much

else in our lives today become more globalised, our church horizons remain narrow – and our lives are diminished accordingly.)

Small wonder perhaps that the churches, at least in the ‘North’, appear to be experiencing something of a crisis of confidence. And for some years those who move in ecumenical circles have tried to persuade themselves and others that we are not living through an ‘ecumenical winter’ or, as Cardinal Keith O’Brien put it, even more strikingly, in his address to the Scottish Ecumenical Gathering at Perth in June, an ‘ecumenical ice-age’.

It is possible to adduce all sorts of rational arguments, rooted in scripture and grounded in theology, to demonstrate that ecumenical engagement is integral to Christian commitment, and not just, as it is too often regarded, an ‘optional extra’ for enthusiasts and eccentrics, people who are ‘into that sort of thing’, or an alternative to, say, teaching in the Sunday school or singing in the choir. But such arguments, however sound and persuasive in themselves, are unlikely to change the thinking of more than a few. How fully each of us embraces ecumenism is likely to depend on our own ‘story’, to be the result of our personal experience as much as the outcome of philosophical or theological reflection.

I have been extremely fortunate over the years. While growing up in a Church of Scotland home, attending church week by week, I do not think I have ever been a ‘conviction Presbyterian’, in the sense of thinking that this form of church governance, while having many good and even exemplary features, is somehow divinely ordained and intrinsically superior to all others: I suppose I am a Presbyterian, as it were, by genetic accident; and I am sure that I am by no means unique in seeing it this way. While my membership has always remained within the Church of Scotland, and, even before becoming a minister, I have always tried to play an active part in the life of the congregation to which I belonged, alongside that there has always been a wider ecumenical dimension. Indeed the experience above all that impelled me towards ministry, after fifteen years working as a civil servant in Edinburgh and London, was my involvement over a period of ten years

or so in two ‘outreach’ projects backed by some of the city-centre churches (Church of Scotland and Scottish Episcopal) in the west end of Edinburgh. The first was *Cephas*, a late-night three times a week ‘beat club’ (at the time in the early 1960s when that musical style was very popular) in the crypt of one of the churches, attended by around two hundred young people each night. Some of us moved on to set up *The Corner Stone* in the specially restored and converted crypt of another of the churches – a coffee-house open late at night at weekends, catering for the broadest cross-section of people imaginable (this was the early 1970s before licensing hours were extended!). The *Cephas* premises have long been used for other purposes, recently converted by the congregation into attractive offices for leasing to voluntary organisations. *The Corner Stone* remarkably is still functioning, but for some years has been operated on a commercial basis.

What was significant and distinctive to these two projects was that they were run by lay people (some ministers were, however, involved both as volunteers and supporters) and they were totally ecumenical: denominational affiliation was inconsequential; indeed some volunteers had little or no church connection. This was mission as engagement, encounter and exploration; witness through conversation and discussion, unobtrusive and unapologetic. There was a strong sense of common purpose and mutual support among the volunteers (into which some of the clientele were inevitably absorbed), reinforced by worship together, and many life-long friendships were forged there.

It was here that I discovered and experienced for the first time, I suppose, what has come to be described as ‘ecumenical spirituality’ – faith integrated in word and action, practical ecumenism; and it was only later on that I developed any awareness of the ecumenical structures. Indeed, while I now know that ‘ecumenical formation’ is a strong theme within the ecumenical movement, my own ministerial training, along traditional Church of Scotland lines, included virtually nothing of this dimension; and as far as I am aware, twenty-five years or so on, regrettably this is still generally the case. My original intention was to be a parish minister, but other doors opened unexpectedly; and I worked first in university chaplaincy at Edinburgh University, then

as a lecturer in practical theology at Glasgow University, and then as Leader of the Iona Community, before becoming minister of Govan Old Parish Church in March 2003.

This has meant, therefore, that, although remaining an active member of my local Church of Scotland congregation, for a considerable period the day-to-day focus and scope of my work (in the universities and with the Iona Community) has been thoroughly ecumenical: my involvement was with people of many different church traditions and none, and denominational labels, loyalties and identity were seldom of significance. And alongside this, while becoming involved in a number of Church of Scotland committees over the years, I had the privilege of being appointed to represent the Church of Scotland within the ecumenical structures – the British Council of Churches, then the Council of Churches (later renamed to Churches Together) for Britain and Ireland, Action of Churches Together in Scotland, the European Ecumenical Commission for Church and Society (now part of the Conference of European Churches) and, from the Harare Assembly in 1998 until the Porto Alegre assembly earlier this year, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.

In and through all these experiences I have undergone, entirely informally as it were, and to a degree almost unconsciously, a process of ‘ecumenical formation’, as a result of which I am totally committed to ecumenism and, while aware of the pitfalls and some of the deficiencies in the present structures, convinced that there can be no way forward for the churches in today’s world other than one that seeks to overcome the differences that are a barrier to effective witness and mission and a denial of our oneness in Jesus Christ.

In the earlier days of the ecumenical movement there were successive generations of people whose international contacts, through, for instance, the YMCA and the World Student Christian Federation/Student Christian Movement, provided an invaluable grounding for the development of ecumenism both within their own countries and internationally. Naturally they thought in terms of a united ‘world

church’ – the ‘full organic union’ or ‘full visible unity’ that was the founding vision and purpose of the World Council of Churches. To some extent the cooling of enthusiasm for ecumenical structures that is evident currently can be attributed to the decline in these international youth movements over the last forty years or so.

The developments that have taken place, both within the World Council, and concerning ecumenism in Britain, within the last twenty years involve a significant change of approach, some apparent modification, even watering down of the original confident vision. The term ‘church unity’ no longer is understood only in terms of church *union*, as tended to be the case previously. The paradigms shift and the phrases and concepts that are in vogue tend to come and go as the context changes. In recent years, through the WCC process – ‘Towards a common understanding and vision’ that culminated at the Harare assembly in December 1998 – the notion of ‘reconciled diversity’ has emerged, still allowing possibly for the achievement of the ultimate goal of ‘full visible unity’, with thoroughly integrated structures, but stopping short of a sterile sort of ‘uniformity’. It will be interesting to see how the statement agreed at the Porto Alegre assembly is followed up and what reaction it evokes within the member churches.

Within Scotland of course the Church of Scotland’s rejection of the SCIFU (Scottish Churches Initiative for Union) process in 2003 was seen as a major set-back by many and welcomed by others – both those who are not enthusiasts for ecumenism in any case and by those who are, but regarded this particular scheme as a ‘top-down’ imposition that had little relevance to the realities of church life at the grass-roots. Meanwhile ‘conversations’ continue, to some extent multilaterally, but principally in bilateral form. In fact there is some evidence to suggest that some denominations are investing more energy and effort in pursuing discussions bilaterally (and securing agreements that involve mutual recognition and sharing – for example, Poorvoo, Meissen) and in contributing to the world-wide *confessional* groupings, than in fulfilling their commitment to the national or international *ecumenical* bodies.

Moreover, both within Britain and within the life of the World Council, there have been very significant changes, in terms of both the structures and the priorities, over the last two decades or so. Here in Britain in 1990 the British Council of Churches was replaced by the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (subsequently renamed to ‘Churches Together in Britain and Ireland’), and the Scottish Churches Council by Action of Churches Together in Scotland, with parallel bodies for England and Wales. These were much more than cosmetic changes: fundamental issues of accountability and authority were at stake. For some years there had been a degree of disquiet in certain quarters within some of the member churches of the BCC, where it was felt that the priorities of the BCC and some of its statements on public issues (regarded as unduly ‘radical’ and outspoken) could not be owned. Moreover, it had become clear that the desirable goal of the Roman Catholic churches becoming full members of the new ecumenical structures could only be attained through developing a different model – of ‘churches together’ – so that the function of the ecumenical bodies lay essentially in supporting and coordinating the work of the member churches, and initiating joint projects, rather than in undertaking activities and speaking, without any real accountability, on their behalf.

An analysis of the extent to which the bodies created in 1990 have been successful is really beyond the scope of this article, and would in any case probably depend on the criteria and standpoint adopted. But it is perhaps significant that within the last three years or so it has been felt necessary, largely for financial reasons, to make further changes, both in the structure of ACTS and, more recently, in the scaling down and, to some extent, re-focusing of CTBI. There have probably been gains, in terms of increasing the sense of ownership by the member churches and strengthening the fellowship and belonging together of the churches, and certainly in securing the formal involvement of the Roman Catholic churches; but it is also arguable that there have been losses, in that the BCC, as an independent body with its own governance, was able to do and say the kind of things with a critical ‘cutting edge’ that, for one reason or another, are not possible under the new arrangements.

There have been parallel processes at work within the life of the World Council. As the WCC membership has increased (it currently stands at 347, and many of the newer member churches come from the ‘South’) serious financial pressures, owing largely to the inability of most of the larger ‘Western’ churches to sustain the high level of support on which the WCC has depended for years, and to the unpredictable fluctuations in international markets, have resulted in significant staffing reductions and adjustment of priorities. A high proportion of the WCC’s funding now comes, not from the contributions of member churches, but from what are known as ‘global agencies’ or ‘specialist ministries’ (bodies like Christian Aid), who provide finance, usually on an ad hoc basis, for particular programmes and projects.

There has been an increasing emphasis too on the WCC as a ‘fellowship’ of churches, with an enabling and coordinating function, getting ‘experts’ together, facilitating processes of sharing, exploration and mutual support, producing resources. Many of the Orthodox churches, who have been part of the ecumenical movement and full members of the WCC for many years, began to express some misgivings about aspects of the WCC’s workings (such as its quasi-parliamentary decision-making process; some of the programmatic priorities and statements made on ethical issues; its inclusive approach to and understanding of worship). The work of a Special Commission on Orthodox Participation, set up at the Harare assembly, has led to some significant changes – for instance in the introduction of procedures for decision-making by consensus (surprisingly successful when used for the first time at the Porto Alegre assembly), and an approach to worship at ecumenical events that provides for ‘confessional’ as well as ‘inter-confessional’/ecumenical liturgies.

While it is sometimes regarded as the churches’ equivalent of the United Nations, and indeed frequently interacts with the UN and its agencies, the WCC itself recognises that there are many churches that it does not include or represent – in particular a wide range of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, growing so fast particularly in the ‘South’ (many of which of course are independent and not centrally organised to any great extent), and most of the churches that are part of

the Lausanne movement (whose priorities, and indeed theology, might be hard to accommodate alongside those of the WCC); and above all the Roman Catholic church, which nonetheless plays a full part in the parts of the WCC that relate to faith and order and to mission, and is invariably well represented, with ‘delegated observer’ status, at most major WCC events (although, if I may be allowed a passing and possibly very controversial personal observation, the ecclesiology of both the Roman Catholic church – see, for instance, *Dominus Jesus* – and the Orthodox churches do seem hard to reconcile with the ‘open’ approach to ecumenism that characterises most ecumenical bodies).

As a result, within the WCC, there has been increasing talk of ‘reconfiguration’ of the ecumenical ‘architecture’, and of the significance of the World Council’s role in providing ‘ecumenical space’ for the exchange of views and experience and the development of future collaborative work appropriate to contemporary needs. It has sometimes been hard to see how the various initiatives undertaken relate to one another: the plans for a ‘global forum’; the discussions with evangelicals and Pentecostals; the round tables with the ‘specialist ministries’; an ad hoc ‘reconfiguration’ gathering held at Antelias in 2004 and a follow-up event the following year. In the discussions in this field at Porto Alegre the interesting concept of ‘choreography’ emerged: it will be interesting to see how the dance goes on in the days ahead!

At the Porto Alegre assembly four areas were agreed on which the WCC’s work will focus principally over the period up to the next assembly: unity, spirituality and mission; global justice; ecumenical formation; and prophetic witness and public voice. These are not specific programmes so much as broad themes which will undergird and provide a framework for the development of programmatic priorities. They encapsulate and reflect the range and diversity of all the discussions that were prompted and undergirded by the assembly theme, and it is to be hoped that they will feed creatively into the life of the ecumenical movement generally – within the ecumenical bodies.

God, in your grace, transform the world. At the end of the day that is what it is all about, and unless the ecumenical ‘choreography’ (or ‘architecture’, or whatever we call it) contributes to this process of transformation, to the spiritual searching of individuals, to the mission and renewal of the church and to the creation of a world in which compassion, peace and justice prevail it serves little purpose. The jury is still out; it is all to play and pray for; meanwhile the journey goes on.