

## How Will a WCC Conference Create An Environment for Dialogue?

**Being one of about 600 attendees from 105 countries, including full participants from the Roman Catholic Church and from some Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and networks, raised a question.**

*Cathy Chang, a delegate and a Princeton Seminary M.Div. student*

On May 9-16, I attended the World Council of Churches (WCC) Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). The conference's theme was "Come, Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile! Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities." Our PC(USA) delegation also included Bethany Borak, Raafat Girgis, Unzu Lee, Marian McClure (on the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism), and Clint McCoy.

### **Preparation**

As I prepared for Athens, I met with Professor Darrell Guder and he asked about my mission experience. I highlighted some short-term experiences, mostly sponsored by parachurch organizations or denominations other than the PC(USA); my 2002-2003 experience as a PC(USA) Young Adult Volunteer in Cairo, Egypt, was my first taste of doing mission in ecumenical partnership. I also told him about the opportunity to meet and dialogue with other young missiologists at a WCC-sponsored consultation in Rome, Italy, in January.

An internal dialogue had already begun within me. And it seemed that this CWME conference also wanted dialogue *among* Christians of various traditions. My main question became, "How will the conference create an environment for such dialogue to occur?"

I partially answered this question as I thought about the Rome consultation, designed to invite young people to prepare for Athens. In Rome we had divided into different groups for discussion. I joined the group that discussed dialogue, both interdenominational and interreligious. Our group consisted of Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Presbyterian/Reformed, Lutheran, and Pentecostal participants. I was struck by my colleagues' comments, which provided a good reality check on the challenges of ecumenism.

- Stephen, a Nigerian pastor, shared his concerns about what it means to be a "young" missiologist. He said that a typical 30-year old from a developing country might not have reached the same stage educationally as someone from the western world; this affected the opportunity to participate, because of age criteria.

### **An internal dialogue had begun within me. CWME also wanted dialogue among Christians.**

- Marcos, a pastor from Peru, talked about the difficulties of expressing himself in English and not feeling free to speak his mind in Spanish.
- Peter, a U.S. seminarian, observed that there were 5 U.S. Presbyterians there but none from Africa, where there is a strong Reformed presence.
- Ulrike, a German woman now

teaching in Peru, was frustrated by the demographics of our consultation: we were not representative enough of the shift of Christianity away from the north.

Attending the Young Missiologist Consultation had, in fact, prepared me for CWME. I sensed that I would experience and observe even greater joys, insights, and challenges of ecumenism in Athens.

### **Joys and insights**

Some of these greater joys came in the form of ecumenical fellowship. Each morning after breakfast and at the close of each day, I led a 'home group.' In the morning, we read together through Bible passages in the *Lectio Divina* style. I remember the words of Tobias, my Swiss German colleague who is a prison chaplain in Hong Kong, when we studied Ezekiel 37. He talked about how the passage reminded him of *baai shan* — the prison jargon for a prison visit that actually means 'to worship one's ancestors.' "It is the feeling that the prison visitor is going to visit somebody who is already in the grave, a dead body," he explained.

Another form of fellowship came in the opportunity to worship together in song. Different participants at the conference took turns in worship leadership, so I learned songs in other languages and from various liturgies. We learned Pentecostal praise songs and even a Greek Orthodox ⇒

liturgical hymn proclaiming *Christos Anesti* ('Christ is risen').

There was also plenty of opportunity to learn through the plenary speakers and from the *synaexis* — in Greek, 'a gathering of people' — that allowed participants to opt for attending various afternoon groups to address each day's sub-themes.

At the conclusion of the conference, I learned from 'listeners' who presented their observations to the conference participants. Two particularly caught my attention. Professor Nam-Soon Kang talked about the use of language as power, especially when it is Euro- and androcentric. Rev. Dr. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu spoke about his African contextual reality but with deep concern for the future of ecumenism. While discussing what it would be like to partake Holy Communion across different Christian traditions, he exclaimed, "How can we eat secular food together and not take the Eucharist together?"

### **Tensions**

As much as I experienced the joys of ecumenical fellowship, there were also challenges and tensions.

From the moment I checked in at the registration area, I knew something set me apart. I was at least five years older than some of the stewards and it appeared that I was 20 years younger than the average conference participant. I longed for more young adults who could consider themselves delegates of a WCC-member church or of a WCC-affiliated body.

In our home group, I had hoped for more diversity. Initially our group consisted mostly of men from either North America or Western Europe. Eventually our group gained Janet, a woman from Canada, but we still were not representative of the conference participants. When the delegates sang together in the morning, I

also noticed that there was not always full participation. For instance, I did not recall seeing any Orthodox priests in the congregation when the Pentecostals led worship.

Another source of tension came from outside the confines of the retreat center. Since this was the first CWME to be hosted in a predominantly Orthodox context, I was interested to learn what kind of reaction it would cause. A few yards away from our worship tent, I saw and heard for myself: After our conference kicked off, a 'breakaway' faction of the Greek Orthodox Church protested the conference. Yet soon after we learned how to sing *Christos Anesti*, we heard strains of the same liturgy at the protest. By day 4, our conference daily newspaper published a statement: "The conference leadership entirely respects [the protesters'] right to hold different views, but also upholds the right of participants to peace and tolerance." Some participants expressed the desire to worship together with the protesters; others ignored them. Here we were at a conference bringing together Christians of various traditions. I could not help but wonder what dialogue would have looked like if we had extended an invitation for it to this 'breakaway' faction.

One of the greater challenges became apparent in the final plenary. Designated writers presented a 'Letter from Athens,' to be sent to the churches and respective bodies of conference participants, instead of a statement that previously delegates from WCC-member churches would have prepared. After the letter reading, participants volunteered their feedback. During the whole week, the framework of the conference had been conducive to listening and dialoguing with one another. Now, in the few hours remaining, we worked through some revisions of the letter. In a sense, we shifted gears from listening to one another to ensuring

that the letter sounded "just right." Factions formed between those who wished to work on something and those who wanted to refer the task to the CWME commissioners who were to meet on the following days. In the end, we deferred to the commissioners. As much as I appreciated the efforts of the writers and commissioners to draft and revise our letter, I wished for — and sensed the same desire among other conference participants — a better framework in which to have provided feedback.

**To Do:** Visit <[www.mission2005.com](http://www.mission2005.com)> for conference news and documents; download free a book of WCC statements on mission from 1980 to 2005, or order a copy. ■

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## Growing Fruits of Faithful Endeavor The CUIC Ministry Task Force

Freda A. Gardner, member of CUIC Ministry Task Force

As churches of many denominations narrow their definition of ‘church’ to the congregation of which they are a part or to churches in their own neighborhoods, to speak of ‘ecumenical’ movements, issues, or challenges is more like whistling in the wind than speaking to the choir. Yet there are those among us who have, for years and even decades, devoted their attention, prayers, and labors to the church of Jesus Christ in all of its manifestations. Those pioneers — and local, regional, denominational, and global foot soldiers who have studied, prayed, met, written, defended, and advocated to the end that Jesus’ prayer “that all might be one” might be realized — merit our deep gratitude and respect.

### *An outgrowth of long effort and a new invitation*

Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) is a relationship among nine Christian communions that have pledged to live more closely together in expressing their unity in Christ and to combat racism together. **CUIC** is both an outgrowth of and a successor to the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), an organization that worked for more than 40 years toward the day when Christians can become more fully reconciled to each other. In 2002, its member churches covenanted to enter CUIC and committed themselves to theological dialogue that would provide a foundation for mutual recognition of ordained ministries.

**CUIC** is not a new *structure*. It is an officially recognized *invitation* to live with one another differently. Christians in the pews know that we belong together because we all belong to the same Lord. **CUIC** is a framework for showing to the world what we truly are — the one Body of Jesus Christ. Thus, one of the Marks of Commitment within CUIC is the emphasis on combating racism within these churches and marks a recognition that the unity called for by our God cannot ignore the divisions that exist across racial lines. **CUIC** intends to keep our denominations attentive to the overt and subtle evidences of racism that exist both in and among our churches.

### *Toward Full Communion*

The Ministry Task Force, one of three task forces of CUIC, was charged with providing a foundation for the mutual recognition and reconciliations of ordained ministry by the CUIC members. It undertook this responsibility through four years of dialogue which resulted in a document that would set forth the foundations, hopes, and processes that would allow the member churches to recognize and reconcile their ordained ministries. This would complete a process of inviting the churches to declare themselves in ‘Full Communion.’ Full Communion denotes the unity between partner churches who acknowledge each other’s faith as authentically biblical and apostolic, who pledge themselves to work together in mission, acknowledge the validity of each other’s sacramental life, and who have reconciled ministries, including the affirmation that the ordained ministers of the partners are recognized as ministers of all.

The Ministry Task Force proposal, “Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation of Ministries,” in its seventh draft, is now in the hands of selected groups from

local churches and governing bodies at several levels within each denomination. These groups are asked to study it, using a study guide, and to respond from their particular perspectives to the document as a whole and to those parts that have special significance to their respective churches. Following the responses and feedback from the churches, the task force will develop a final proposal for the member communions to approve.

#### Nine CUIC communions:

African Methodist Episcopal Church  
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church  
Episcopal Church  
International Council of Community Churches  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
United Church of Christ  
United Methodist Church

### *Presbyterian-Episcopal issues*

The PC(USA) has a long history of ecumenical involvement and has moved into significant partnerships with a number of denominations. Because so many of the issues in the previous COCU conversations that related to the reconciliation of ministries involved differences between the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church understandings of oversight and *episcopate*, a separate bilateral dialogue was established between these churches. This group has provided feedback to the CUIC efforts and has sought to define and lift up theological, ecclesial, and practical evidences of our common mission and ministry. Simply put, the differences between our church and the Episcopal Church focus in two areas:

- We believe that our *ordained clergy are in historic succession*, derived from the earliest expressions of ministry in Christ’s church. The Episcopal Church believes that their *bishops are in historic episcopal succession* and are essential in ordinations. ⇒

- Presbyterians have a *corporate episcopate* (ministers and elders). The presence of ordained clergy and elders is essential both for valid ordinations within the PC(USA) and for sacramental celebrations. In CUIC, “presbyter” is the biblical name for those *persons* designated ‘pastor,’ ‘elder,’ ‘minister,’ or ‘priest.’

### ***A process and a goal***

The Ministry Task Force draft asserts that each church will decide who among its leadership will be designated as bishop for ecumenical purposes. If the CUIC member churches can see themselves in all of these proposed acts/commitments and can find that their own understanding of God’s call to the church is ratified, we can move to acknowledge each others’ ministries and together witness to a world needing the church and its gift of bearing the gospel to all of God’s people.

Reconciliation of ministry is both a goal and a process. The goal is less difficult to explain; the process by which we move together toward the goal is most often the stumbling block. Making the other believe and act as we do is very difficult and, more importantly, unnecessary. Agreeing that each member church is following its own understanding of how it provides for witness and ministry to and in the world will allow the churches to share the joys and challenges of being Christ’s body in this 21st century.

To join forces in the effort to eradicate racism is a worthy goal in itself. Closer working and worshipping together may contribute to our recognition that we are all God’s children — gifted, needy, human, fearful, hopeful, faithful — and deserving of the best opportunities we can create together for the discovery of that truth for ourselves and each other. ■

[See p. 6 for CUIC Resources.]

## **Anticipating the WCC Ninth Assembly**

*Robina Winbush, Associate Stated Clerk*

When Christians gather from churches around the world, there is always an air of excitement and anticipation. The Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is no exception. Gathering in Porto Alegre, Brazil on February 14-23, 2006, over 3000 church leaders and representatives from every Christian tradition will join in worship, prayer, study, and deliberation around the theme, “God, In Your Grace Transform the World.” The first WCC Assembly of the 21st century will be the broadest global gathering of its kind.

This will be the first WCC Assembly held in Latin America. As the continent’s largest country, Brazil offers a culturally and religiously diverse context for it. The Brazilian National Council of Churches (CONIC) will serve as the local host with the full participation of the Roman Catholic Church, which is a member of CONIC but not the WCC. In addition to the strong Christian presence in Brazil, there are strong communities of Afro-Brazilians who practice traditional religions, as well as Muslims and Jewish communities.

This will be the first Assembly since the report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. Established by the Eighth Assembly in Harare (1998), the Special Commission addressed Orthodox concerns with the direction and priorities of the Council and in 2002 made a number of proposals to enable the Orthodox voice to be more effectively heard. One significant recommendation, to practice consensus decision-making during the Assembly, was approved by the Central Committee earlier this year. It is hoped that this change will reduce contentious debate and invite the delegates to listen more fully to each other and to make decisions inclusive of a variety of perspectives.

The quest for visible unity of the churches will be central as delegates consider a statement on ecclesiology, “What Church is God Calling Us To Be Together?,” drafted by the Faith and Order Commission. Its purpose is (1) to reflect what the churches can say together about the Church at this point in their journey; and (2) to invite them into renewed conversation about “the quality and degree of their fellowship and communion” and about what still divides them.

In January 2001, the WCC launched the Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace (DOV). The Ninth Assembly will assess the impact of the DOV and commit anew to engage member churches as active agents of justice, reconciliation, and peace in their particular contexts.

A major thematic plenary will focus on viable alternatives to globalization. The critical work of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) on “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and Earth” will inform many Reformed delegates [see p. 7]. Delegates will be asked to consider a background document, “Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and the Earth (AGAPE)” as they pray for God’s grace to transform global economic systems that leave the majority of the world’s people and the earth vulnerable and suffering.

Yes, there is an air of excitement as Christians gather and seek together God’s will for our time. Across cultures, languages, traditions, and national differences, we will seek a common witness to the one God we seek to serve. As we pray, “God, in your grace, transform the world,” we look forward to our own transformation. ■