Mission and Ecumenism Today: Reflections on the Tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Busan, Republic of Korea

S. Wesley Ariarajah

Six out of ten is not at all a bad score,” said one of my friends at Busan when he realized that, with Busan, I have attended six of the ten assemblies of the WCC. My global ecumenical involvement began in the Faith and Order Commission in 1971, and then in 1975 I was invited as a youth adviser and one of the speakers at the Unity Plenary to the Nairobi Assembly. Nairobi, however, is remembered mostly for the acrimonious and heated debate over the program Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies. When the newly created Sub-Unit on Dialogue brought its report “Seeking Community” to the floor of the assembly, a passionate debate, led by some prominent European voices, began to challenge the very concept of dialogue. They feared it would lead to syncretism, compromise the uniqueness and finality of Christ, and undermine the missionary mandate.

This is an overfamiliar story, and few in mission circles today would want to reopen such a mission-dialogue debate. The concept and practice of dialogue has flourished over the past four decades. In fact, the situation has so dramatically changed that it is persistent religious plurality, along with the pressure on Christians to make sense of it and relate to it, that is weighing on mission discussions today. But Nairobi has much meaning for me personally, because it was my active participation in the dialogue debate at the assembly and at the consultation in Chiang Mai that eventually led to my move from Faith and Order to Interfaith Dialogue, eventually leading to the call to become the director of the WCC dialogue program for over ten years.

Assembly Themes

Philip Potter, third general secretary of the WCC, used to say that the themes chosen for the assemblies are “time signals” that reflect the times in which the assemblies are held and the “mood of the churches” at the times they meet. Thus, the Amsterdam Assembly in 1948, in the aftermath of the Second World War and its widespread devastation, chose as its theme “Man’s Disorder and God’s Design.” Ever since the Second Assembly, in Evanston, Illinois (1954), whose theme was “Christ—the Hope of the World,” Christological proclamations have been the focus of most of the assemblies. For example, “Jesus Christ—the Light of the World” (New Delhi, 1961), “Jesus Christ Frees and Unites” (Nairobi, 1975), and “Jesus Christ—the Life of the World” (Vancouver, 1983). Konrad Raiser, fifth WCC general secretary, traces the development of this Christocentric universalism as a conscious choice made by the Council, especially under the influence of its first general secretary, W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, and points out that we are in the process of transition from that predominant paradigm. He points to irreducible religious plurality as one of the factors that is moving the ecumenical movement toward a new paradigm.1

The theme at Busan was a prayer: “God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace.” The enormous economic inequalities within and between nations, the rise of a pervasive culture of violence, and the multifaceted threats to human life and to the earth are well captured by the words “life,” “justice,” and “peace” in this theme. So for this latest assembly as well, the theme was indeed a “time signal” indicating the “mood of the churches” in our day.

Worship Life of the Assembly

In the hope of animating ecumenical spirit and interest in my students, I had accompanied thirty-four students from the Drew University School of Theology, where I teach now, to the previous assembly in Porto Alegre. This time, one of my Korean colleagues and I accompanied twenty-four students to Busan. I had promised them that, if nothing else, the worship life of the assembly would be worth the trip they would make from New Jersey to Busan. In fact, ever since the Vancouver Assembly, one of the great features of WCC assemblies has been joyous worship, reflecting the incredible variety of peoples, cultures, and traditions that make up the global Christian fellowship.

Unfortunately, on this score Busan proved to be a great disappointment. Despite a talented group that made up the assembly Worship Committee, which devoted enormous effort to the preparation of worship, the results were the least appealing part of the assembly, particularly to anyone who had been to one of the previous assemblies.

The explanation lies partly in the nature of the worship space available and its choreography, and partly in an excessive attempt to develop the assembly theme in worship life. (In my view, the latter effort was unwarranted. The theme was adequately covered in plenary sessions, well-planned Bible studies, and so-called Ecumenical Conversations.) But a much more fundamental issue affected the worship life, which needs to be addressed as we go forward: concession to Orthodox churches.

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Orthodox churches from their suppression under Communist regimes, the Orthodox have taken a much needed closer look at their participation in the WCC. A special commission was set up to study the concerns of the Orthodox churches, and after study for some years, its final report was presented to the WCC Central Committee in February 2006. Among the conditions the Orthodox submitted for their further participation, two have had direct impact on the two assemblies since then. The first is the consensus method of decision making. The second relates to the worship life of the assemblies. The commission report welcomes and encourages joint public prayer but maintains that “inter-confessional common prayer” at WCC gatherings is not the worship of an ecclesial body.2 The special commission report has a whole section on worship at ecumenical gatherings that spells out some of the genuine difficulties Orthodox churches have had at ecumenical worship events, including the use of inclusive language about God, the use of

S. Wesley Ariarajah, Methodist minister from Sri Lanka, is Professor of Ecumenical Theology at the Drew University School of Theology, Madison, New Jersey. Before joining Drew in 1997, he served the WCC in Geneva for sixteen years, first as the Director of the WCC program on Interfaith Dialogue (twelve years) and then as Deputy General Secretary of the Council.

—wariaraj@drew.edu

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symbols, and the participation of women in leading worship. These reservations began to be addressed in the organization of worship at the Porto Alegre Assembly and had definite effects on its worship life.

These conditions were implemented more strictly in Busan, with the result that the churches that gathered from across the globe could not really worship but could only pray together. Thus, we had opening and closing prayers, but not opening and closing worship services. And the daily morning prayers remained muted and highly scripted, perhaps to keep them as well at the level of “inter-confessional prayers” that would not spill over into celebratory worship.

While I have been sympathetic to the Orthodox churches’ desire to evaluate their involvement in the WCC and have welcomed many of the new proposals, I have been unhappy with the position taken in the final report of the special commission that we should not engage in worship at ecumenical gatherings of the WCC because of the ecclesial character, or the lack of it, of these gatherings. Already at the founding assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, a resolution on the “Authority of the Council” was adopted clearly stating that the WCC was only a “fellowship of churches” and that it “disavows any thought of becoming a single unified church structure independent of the churches which have joined in constituting the Council.” But it maintained that the churches that come together on the basis of their common confession of Christ would “desire continually to pray for one another and to strengthen one another, in worship and in witness” (emphasis mine; see also the 1950 Toronto Statement). The strongest way these ecclesial affirmations found expression in the past was in common worship.

I am aware that some of the Orthodox participants have found it difficult to participate in the excessively informal Protestant-led worship celebrations at ecumenical gatherings, and the Busan Assembly Worship Committee was rightly sensitive to the concerns raised and suggestions made in the special commission report. My own worry about the assembly worship, however, is not only about the muted character of its morning prayers but, much more, about what the continued refusal to engage in worship says about the ecumenical situation today. If churches that “confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures” do not have sufficient “ecclesial character” to be able to celebrate their common life in worship, we have a major crisis in the ecumenical movement. The Orthodox family of churches urgently needs to reexamine this condition for their participation in the WCC.

Ecumenical Discussions of Issues

One of the difficult problems that assembly organizers had to deal with is that an assembly is, at the same time, both a legislative, decision-making body of the WCC and a once-in-seven-year celebration of the global ecumenical fellowship. In the past, this problem was handled by making a clear distinction between “delegates” (appointed by the member churches) and “visitors” (persons who came from all around the world, plus a large contingent of people from the churches in the country where the assembly was held). The number of delegates allotted to each of the churches was limited, based on their size, and the delegations needed to be balanced in terms of gender, lay/ordained, and age. While these limitation were necessary, they also meant that many important church leaders, ecumenical veterans, leaders of local and national ecumenical networks, and persons who had good knowledge of the issues discussed at the assembly, do research, or teach ecumenism as part of their careers could participate only as “visitors.”

Busan should be credited for making an innovative breakthrough in addressing this problem. Delegates, of course, had to be delegates and do the constitutional functions required of them at business sessions. But the category of visitor was abolished; all who registered to be at the assembly were made “Assembly Participants.” There were common Bible study sessions for delegates and other participants. More important, delegates and other participants were pooled together to discuss issues and to propose future program directions, in what were called Ecumenical Conversations. This was an innovative step forward—but it had its own challenges. Now one had to deal not with 800–1,000 delegates (as in the past) to discuss issues but with about 2,500 participants! Therefore, the traditional seven or eight sections of delegates to discuss ecumenical issues gave way to twenty-one Ecumenical Conversations, each including 80–100 persons. The organizers, to their credit, had carefully planned the sessions of ecumenical conversations to ensure maximum participation and substantial discussions, and to gather the main convictions for the use of the committee that worked on program guidelines for the future. Everyone realizes that within the time it had, the Program Guidelines Committee could not do justice to all the rich input from the twenty-one conversations (as is evident in its report!), but the effort was well worth it, and the reports of the conversations are there for those who wish to consider them for future program work.

Statement on Unity

Any longtime observer of the ecumenical movement cannot but be surprised by the “Unity Statement” adopted by the assembly through its consensus process. At first sight, especially to those who have not followed the internal struggles within the ecumenical movement over the decades, the statement looks straightforward and appropriate, calling for and making clear commitment to the visible unity of the church. Indeed, it is so from one perspective. What, then, is the difficulty? Here one needs to look at the statement from a historical perspective.

The WCC, although organized as a “fellowship of churches” in Amsterdam in 1948, is in fact the coming together of three distinct movements, namely, the missionary movement (institutionalized as the International Missionary Council, which joined the WCC in 1961 at the New Delhi Assembly), the Faith and Order Movement, and the Life and Work Movement, all having their own distinct agendas. For instance, while Faith and Order was working to overcome denominational and confessional differences relating to unity, denomination-based missionary movements were planting denominations in the mission fields; the search for doctrinal unity in Faith and Order and the struggles in the programs that came out of the Life and Work movement to call the churches to act together against social injustices were on separate tracks. As someone who has worked
as a staff person at the WCC for sixteen years with three past general secretaries of the Council, I have witnessed the enormous frustrations experienced by these general secretaries in their failed attempts to integrate the three movements through new program proposals and by restructuring the Council. While some of the studies crossed the boundaries, on the whole, all three programs had their own constituencies that blocked any progress on this matter.

I was therefore surprised to hear at the Busan Assembly a unity statement calling generally for greater commitment to the visible unity of the church but with hardly any explicit references to important recent Faith and Order studies. There were discussions in the Ecumenical Conversations that related more directly to classic Faith and Order issues, but their lack of prominence in the unity statement is noteworthy.

The statement says, “In faithfulness to this our common calling, we will seek together the full visible unity of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church when we shall express our unity around the one Table of the Lord.” In these words it does affirm Faith and Order’s traditional agenda. But it goes further to maintain a prominent tone of a comprehensive understanding of the unity we seek: “We will intensify our work for justice, peace and the healing of creation, and address together the complex challenges of contemporary social, economic and moral issues. We will work for more just, participatory and inclusive ways of living together. We will make common cause for the well-being of humanity and creation with those of other faith communities.” When we study this together with the recent Mission Statement, which has expressed intentional interest in the unity of the church and social issues, it would appear that the hoped-for integration of the three movements might have begun to take some shape. We need to wait and see how this plays out in postassembly developments, especially as the Council looks for greater involvement of the Pentecostal churches in its fellowship.

Mission, Evangelism, and Dialogue

Of specific interest to the readers of the International Bulletin of Missionary Research are ecumenical discussions at Busan related to mission, evangelism, and dialogue. In preparation for the assembly, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC finalized a new mission statement, “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes.” It was unanimously adopted by the WCC Central Committee meeting in Crete, Greece, in September 2012. Dimensions of its thinking were presented to the assembly in a lively Mission Plenary at Busan. For a number of reasons I had hoped that the new statement would also come to the floor of the assembly for its adoption.

To begin with, the new statement constitutes a third major shift in mission thinking. The first shift occurred in 1938 in Tambaran, India, where the Third World Missionary Conference moved the primary responsibility for mission from lay missionary societies and individuals to the church. The next significant shift took place at the International Missionary Council meeting in 1952 in Willingen, West Germany, where mission was described as missio Dei, or mission of God. In this view, the church was not so much the primary mover but a servant and co-worker in God’s mission in the world. (This shift could have had far reaching consequences for the missionary movement’s concept, understanding, and practice of mission and evangelism, particularly in relation to other religious traditions. But the missionary movement, in my view, has a love-hate attitude toward this shift, for while it captured the universal scope of God’s mission, it moved away from the Christocentric universalism that was at the heart and rationale of world evangelization.)

In the third shift the emphasis moved from God to the Holy Spirit. This view understands the Spirit within the affirmation of our Trinitarian understanding of God. Yet it is a significant shift, which might be read by the more conservative mission constituency as a further move away from Christocentrism. I was hoping for a good discussion on this matter at the floor of the assembly.

The “changing landscapes” in the subtitle of the statement plays a significant role in the statement. The growth of Christianity in the South, peoples at the margins, ecology, economic injustices, the lure of Mammon, the search for justice and peace, religious plurality, sensitive and responsible evangelism, and other issues play a significant role in shaping this statement, buttressed by the move to the Spirit. In the past, some within the mission constituency have been guarded in the use of the role of the Spirit in mission discussions.

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where God wills and the call to witness to the salvation God offers in Jesus Christ. In an attempt to go as far as it could, it has statements like “we do not fully understand the workings of the Spirit in other faith traditions” and “authentic mission makes the ‘other’ a partner in, not the ‘object’ of mission.” Furthermore, it affirms that “dialogue at the religious level is possible only if we begin with the expectation of meeting God who has preceded us and has been present with people within their own contexts.” It also says that “evangelism entails not only proclamation of our deepest convictions, but also listening to others and being challenged and enriched by others (Acts 10)” (paragraphs 93–96).

While I have appreciated the new statement and welcomed it, at the personal level I think that the mission discussions need even more radical rethinking. In my new book Your God, My God, Our God—Rethinking Christian Theology for Religious Plurality, I have argued that we need entirely new foundations for mission thinking, which should involve bold rethinking of both classical theology and missiology. But given its constituency, the mission statement had gone perhaps as far as it was able to go. But how would it have been received on the floor of the assembly? Would we have had Nairobi all over again? Unfortunately, we will never know. For while there were a number of Ecumenical Conversations related to mission issues and the new statement, the statement itself was not brought to the floor of the assembly. Would we have had Nairobi all over again? Unfortunately, we will never know. For while there were a number of Ecumenical Conversations related to mission issues and the new statement, the statement itself was not brought to the floor of the assembly for adoption, as statements on unity and a just peace were. The explanation was that it had already been adopted by the Central Committee well before the assembly and was intended mainly to “inform” our discussions at the assembly.

The Host Churches

The Republic of Korea is the most enigmatic of countries in relation to Christianity. Next to the Philippines, it has the largest percentage of Christians per population in Asia, and in the world it is second only to the United States in the number of missionaries sent out to other countries. At the same time, in no other country in the world is the church as divided as in Korea. No one seems to know for sure, but it appears that there are 145 Presbyterian denominations alone in Korea, besides all the other Christian groups. And perhaps nowhere else (with the exception of some parts of the United States) is the ambiguity of the relationship between the church and wealth so glaring as in South Korea. Yet the Korean host churches extended hospitality that exceeded all expectations. They assisted the WCC in the context of its financial difficulties by paying for the modern conference venue and meeting all the internal travel costs of the delegates and all the expenses related to the local preparations of the assembly. They also organized a weekend trip to Seoul for over 800 participants. This trip included a peace pilgrimage to the demarcation line between North and South Korea, worship with local congregations, guest accommodation in Korean homes overnight, and a lavish cultural show. Those who did not go to Seoul had programs of cultural exposure in Busan itself. The local arrangements were meticulously organized and delivered with the characteristic warmth of Korean hospitality. One hopes that the coming of the assembly and the pressures it had on churches to work together will bear its ecumenical fruit in Korea.

Despite the report of the assembly Finance Committee, which presented an honest, if not bleak, financial future, my last word is one of hope. Never before have I attended an assembly where there were so many vibrant, articulate, committed, and passionate youth and women, or greater involvement of the churches from the South. One could see glimmers of hope in the level and quality of their participation.

Notes

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