

Card-carrying ecumenists: The WCC convenes in Brazil

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [March 21, 2006](#) issue

The theme of the World Council of Churches Ninth Assembly, held last month in Porto Alegre, Brazil, was the prayer, “God, in your grace, transform the world.” A recurrent question for many observers is whether the WCC can transform itself.

The WCC is certainly trying hard to change. It is seeking to attract more evangelical and Pentecostal members and to work more closely with the Roman Catholic Church. To widen the ecumenical platform, WCC general secretary Samuel Kobia called for a joint meeting of the organization with international confessional groups like the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

A major shift at this assembly was introduction of a consensus style of decision making. Previously the WCC had used parliamentary procedure in the work of its central committee and assemblies. But the Orthodox churches, which frequently found themselves in the minority, felt marginalized by the process. A Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, set up after the 1998 assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, recommended that the WCC adopt a consensus model of deliberation. The aim is to move the organization beyond the contentious debates and political maneuverings of parliamentary procedure, where there are winners and losers, and change the culture from one of interest groups pressing their causes to one of a corporate body trying to discern the will of God.

But as delegates in Porto Alegre discovered, the consensus approach has its own problems, and it was made more difficult by the number of delegates involved—nearly 700. The consensus approach requires a wise moderator, someone attuned to group process. Vice moderator Marion S. Best of the United Church of Canada was the one who seemed most up to the task.

At Porto Alegre each delegate was given two cards: an orange one to signify a favorable view of the proceedings and a blue one to indicate that one had concerns or questions. Often the moderator’s request for a show of cards functioned like a

straw vote, and straw votes do not necessarily serve to build consensus. In seeking consensus, it is as important to know *why* someone is opposing a certain outcome as it is to know *that* someone is against it.

The search for consensus also tends to favor the most articulate and most aggressive voices. With parliamentary procedure, the less articulate and more reticent delegates at least have an equal say—via the ballot. Besides, as Margot Kässmann, a bishop in the Evangelical Church in Germany, put it, debate and differences of opinion are not all bad for the church.

With an international body like the WCC, there is the additional problem of language. Nam-soon Kang, a South Korean feminist theologian, likened the language division to airline seating: people whose native language is English are in first class, those who speak one of the interpreted languages (at Porto Alegre those were French, German, Spanish, Russian and Portuguese) are in business class, and the rest are confined to economy class.

But the biggest problem of decision making at the assembly was having too large an agenda and too little time. As John H. Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ, observed: “A move to a new model of decision making also requires a move to a new way of organizing ourselves and a new way of bringing business to the assembly. We’ve simply overlaid a consensus model on the same pattern so we have too much business . . . far too much input and not enough time for real discernment.”

Most of the decision making was postponed until the assembly’s second week. Plenary sessions during the first week were devoted to topical speeches and some highly scripted multimedia presentations—MTV’s dubious contribution to the church—that lacked depth as well as theological or social analysis. The one outstanding session featured the highly nuanced presentation “Christian Identity and Religious Plurality,” by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams (see p. 29). The speech was lauded by people across a wide theological spectrum, and it prompted one “low-church Quaker” to comment that Williams is God’s gift to the whole church for these times.

With its financial constraints, the WCC recognizes that it will have to do less. Total income and reserves have fallen 30 percent since 1999. The delegates voted to encourage the organization to focus on what it can uniquely do. “It is hoped that the

WCC will focus its energy and attention on a limited number of issues that cry out for response by the churches together,” said Walter Altmann, a Lutheran theologian from Brazil and the WCC’s newly elected moderator.

For the youth and young adults at the Ninth Assembly, transformation is not happening quickly enough. But that was partly due to unrealistic expectations set up by the WCC itself, which had billed the event as a youth assembly.

It had been decided that 25 percent of the persons nominated for the WCC’s 150-member central committee should be youth or young adults (defined as those between 18 and 30 years of age). When the nominating committee brought its slate, it was far short of the 25 percent figure. The committee said it had done the best it could with the names it had received, and it noted that two regions—Latin America and the Middle East—had nominated no youth. The committee pressed for more names, but in the end only 15 percent of the elected members of the central committee were youth.

Some of the youth staged a quiet protest during a plenary session. Most of the protesters were serving as stewards for the assembly; they were the ones photocopying and distributing documents and helping people find their way around the campus of the Pontifical Catholic University, which hosted the conference. The stewards wore colorful neck scarves, and during the protest they put the scarves over their mouths, signaling that they had been silenced.

The stewards were particularly incensed because the night before they had been turned away from a meeting arranged for youth with the secretary general and the moderator. They were told that only the youth delegates could take part.

The flap over the unmet goal of 25 percent youth representation on the central committee seemed off the mark. The delegates might have better spent their time reflecting on how to meaningfully involve youth in the WCC rather than fighting over a quota.

Some WCC observers pin their hopes for transformation on the possibility of reaching out to Pentecostals and evangelicals. The WCC has done well at making room for communions that care about issues of faith and order (doctrine and ministry) and those that care about the church’s witness on issues like economic justice and the environment. It has done less well in attracting those for whom the crucial matters are spiritual rebirth, baptism in the Holy Spirit and evangelism. And

those are the groups that are experiencing the most growth worldwide.

“The churches that are members of the WCC represent about one-quarter of all Christians, and this trend is moving in the wrong direction as explosive church growth happens elsewhere,” said Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, former director of Church and Society for the WCC and a member of the central committee.

It is not that the WCC has avoided these groups. Kobia reported that before the assembly he had visited several Latin American countries and in each one had extended an invitation to Pentecostals to attend the Porto Alegre event. Though individual Pentecostals expressed interest, they had difficulty getting their denominational structures to sponsor them.

J. Norberto Saracco of the Good News Evangelical Church in Argentina pointed out that for Pentecostal and evangelical churches in Latin America, church unity is achieved through joint commitment to mission and evangelism, not through discussions about faith and order or through institutional alliances. He suggested that the kind of conciliar movement represented by the WCC has run its course. “We know one another better than ever before, we have said to one another all that we have to say, and we understand exhaustively the causes of our divisions.” Hasn’t this form of ecumenism “brought us as far as we can go?” he asked.

Saracco acknowledged, however, that in the past Pentecostal and evangelical churches in Latin America evangelized at the expense of the Roman Catholic Church, and that they did not understand the struggle for justice that many mainstream churches engaged in. He said he fully identifies with the WCC’s concern about eradicating poverty in Latin America and cautioned other churches not to stereotype Latin American Pentecostals and evangelicals as social conservatives.

Granberg-Michaelson urged the WCC to address “the urgent task of building links between its churches and those particularly in the global ‘South’ that are Pentecostal, evangelical, and locally rooted in their contexts.” To do this, he said, the WCC will have to adjust its budget, staff and program priorities. The fact that only one person out of 150 on the new central committee is a Pentecostal suggests that much work still needs to be done in this regard.

Despite all these struggles, WCC leaders are right in claiming that the organization is, on the international level, the broadest and most comprehensive expression of

the visible unity of the church. It is worth preserving and worth transforming.

The search for a perfect instrument to demonstrate the biblically mandated visible unity of the church is akin to the search for the perfect church. Perfection can never be found and the search for it is theologically suspect, because it seems to suggest that the church can somehow shed its humanness. In ecumenism, like the rest of church life, perhaps the wheat needs to grow alongside the tares.

When former archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke at the assembly, he passionately expressed gratitude for how the WCC stood by the church in South Africa when it was trying to throw off the chains of apartheid. The WCC's Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document, which helped to articulate a common theology on these much contested issues, still stands as a powerful testament to the effectiveness of conciliar theology. Time will tell whether the WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence, which is half-way to completion, will bring fruitful changes with its call to the churches to foster nonviolent means of resolving conflict.

Attending an assembly and having the chance to interact and worship with Christians from around the world is always a boundary-transcending event. Such experiences are vivid and necessary reminders that Christians belong to a community without borders, and that our primary identity as Christians is found in the worldwide church, not in our national, ethnic, social or economic affiliations.