

On African soil

by [David Heim](#) in the [December 23, 1998](#) issue

For its 50th-anniversary assembly, the World Council of Churches considered returning to Amsterdam, the site of its founding. But in the end the WCC decided to look to the future, not the past. "The future of Christianity and the future of the ecumenical movement is likely to be shaped and influenced more in regions like Africa and Latin America than in the northern regions," declared General Secretary Konrad Raiser at the opening session of the Eighth Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe. "By the early part of the 21st century, Africa promises to be the continent with the largest Christian population."

In coming to southern Africa, the WCC also revisited a part of the globe in which it invested much of its energy in the 1970s and 1980s. Through its Program to Combat Racism, the WCC supported the black struggle against minority white rule in South Africa and Zimbabwe. It was understandable, then, that in an assembly focused mostly on internal organizational issues, the most electric moment was the surprise visit of South Africa's President Nelson Mandela, who thanked the WCC for its support and recalled how "the name of the WCC struck fear into the hearts of those who ruled our country during the inhuman days of apartheid."

Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe also appeared before the assembly and cited what is perhaps the most controversial event in WCC history--its 1978 decision to provide a grant to the Patriotic Front of Zimbabwe, which was waging an armed struggle against white rule in what was then known as Rhodesia. Though the grant was designated for humanitarian aid, the fact that it offered indirect support for revolution provoked a storm of protest in the U.S. and elsewhere.

When asked about that grant, Raiser said he had no second thoughts. "I have never had doubt about the propriety and advisability of the grant." He added that Zimbabwe's ability since independence to "respect the rights of its white minority while giving equal rights to its black majority" confirmed the wisdom of the WCC's action.

Zimbabwe has indeed been one of the most promising of the postcolonial societies in Africa, with a solid infrastructure, productive agriculture, stable government and an absence of tribal rivalries. Harare itself is one of the most Western cities on the continent, and delegates--especially those who stayed in downtown hotels rather than in the spartan facilities of the University of Zimbabwe, the site of the assembly--suffered minimal amounts of culture shock.

But Zimbabwe has not escaped the problems that afflict the rest of the continent, including an AIDS epidemic that has infected one in five people; a drastically uneven distribution of land; a corrupt government; and massive government debt.

Calls for debt relief were plastered around the university campus, and the assembly heard personal appeals on the issue from Mandela and Mugabe. One could easily get the feeling that the cancellation of Third World debt was in the hands of the WCC. On the day the delegates left town, the Harare *Herald* hopefully proclaimed, "Christians to lobby for cancellation of debts."

The assembly's four-page document on debt declared current debt-management proposals inadequate and criticized the lending policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. "The diversion of resources from impoverished peoples in debtor countries to rich Western countries is a violation of human rights."

The statement did, however, acknowledge the problem of corruption, adding that "both lenders and borrowers must take responsibility for the debt crisis" and that "tough conditions should be imposed on debtor governments."

The much-touted shift of Christianity to the southern and eastern regions of the world is apparent in the new balance on the WCC's 158-member Central Committee, which governs the council in the seven years between assemblies. African churches will occupy 24 seats on the new committee, Asian churches 24--making the two regions roughly equal to the combined weight of the European churches (27 seats) and North American churches (22). The Orthodox churches hold 37 seats.

The financial sponsorship of the WCC remains almost exclusively Western, however. European churches supply 81 percent of the funding (with German churches accounting for about half that amount), and North Americans provide 16 percent. About half the member churches contribute no money at all.

Delegates faced a challenging gospel-and-culture issue in Africa when they considered the membership application of the Celestial Church of Christ in Nigeria. Members of the Celestial Church have been allowed to practice polygamy, and though newly ordained clergy have been barred from the practice since 1986, older clergy continue to live in polygamous unions.

Given that the Celestial Church adheres to the WCC's confession of Christ as Lord and savior, some delegates wondered how the church could be rejected for an ethical practice. Should ethical criteria be applied to other churches as well? Some Africans pointed out that when polygamous men are forced to choose one wife, their other wives often end up in poverty or prostitution.

The application was firmly rejected, but the vote was later ruled technically out of order; the issue was referred to the Central Committee.