

Pilgrimage of Faith

Pilgrimage of Faith

Introducing the World Council of Churches



Donald W. Norwood



World Council
of Churches
Publications

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Introducing the World Council of Churches

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INTRODUCTION

WORLD CHURCH “COUNSELS”

What, Where, Why?

Now that I have finished the book I can tell you what it is about! It's about us – all 550 million of us who are members of the 348 member churches that form the World Council of Churches. The officers of the World Council of Churches are very busy people, visiting and organizing countless operations on our behalf. But the World Council is not just them; it's us. In our local congregations we carry out many tasks the World Council's officers support and encourage. But the policies they act on are those our representatives have agreed to when they meet in the assemblies. In each assembly we take counsel together, having first gathered together in worship and prayed for God's guidance. Hence my emphasis in this book is on taking “counsel” at the ten global assemblies of the World Council of Churches held since its formation in 1948.

Don't be put off by all this talk of councils, counsels, and committees – in addition to formal moments, they include informal conversations, much like a pilgrimage. One bonus of the pilgrimage

round the island of Iona off the west coast of Scotland that my wife and I have often enjoyed is that you need not stay with the same person but can meet different people just by being together in a larger group and that you can slow down or speed up without appearing to be rude.

Where Is the WCC?

General Secretary Olav Fykse Tveit told the delegates at the 2013 assembly in Busan, South Korea, “The WCC is located wherever you are as member churches. You are the WCC.”¹ The main offices are in the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, conveniently located within walking distance of the city’s international airport. But to emphasize the point that the WCC is a global body, its main decision-making body, the assembly, never meets in Geneva but has to date met in every continent. Each location also provides a specific context that has to be personally addressed, because as churches we care about each other where we are. What are the challenges we Christians face *together* because we are in Busan, South Korea, in a country torn in two by a war the middle-aged cannot even remember, or in Amsterdam 1948, soon after the war? So in this study I use each different location of an assembly to highlight issues which were often the dominant concerns of Christians in that place. At the same time, because each assembly brings together peoples from 110 nations, it has to deal with a whole range of issues that are not peculiar to one place but may affect us all. Racism and sexism are good examples. And so is unity. This is our *raison d’être*. Successive assemblies have attempted to describe “the unity we seek.” This was first attempted at New Delhi in 1961 under the heading “all in each place.”

The central committee, a body of some 150 representatives elected by the assembly to act as the WCC governing body between

assemblies that does much of the planning and programming between assemblies, also meets in different locations. So does the Faith and Order commission, another important and foundational working commission of the WCC. Today, we are constantly reminded that most Christians live in the global South, so why not meet in Timbuktu?² The logistics and expense of travel often make Geneva the most convenient venue for smaller meetings. But we will always be sent on our way with the reminder the WCC is everywhere – where we are and also where we are needed most. The council’s emphasis and guiding concept, and so the title of this book, is that we are all engaged in a *Pilgrimage of Faith*. This was the theme developed at the assembly in Busan. We join the pilgrimage wherever we are.

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Who and Where Am I?

Here I am in Oxford, England, Europe, and very conscious as I write of being part of the WCC. Three members of my Reformed congregation were active in the WCC and another an observer at Vatican II. It is thanks to them that I try to be ecumenical in all I do, say, and write. I have been helped in my global vision by attending assemblies and central committees for the last 20 years, as well as living in a very international city. In 2007–2008 my wife and I worked with students from all over the world who were studying at the WCC’s Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, near Geneva. Through Facebook and emails, we are in regular contact with friends from Brazil to Beijing, and I am currently helping a student in India with his doctorate. It is now easier for many of us to say “the whole world is our parish” than it was for John Wesley when he made this claim in the 18th century. Wesley never had a mobile phone. Lucky man!

What Churches?

The WCC is a fellowship made up of national churches. In this it differs from the Roman Catholic Church, which is an international body bound together by obedience to the pope, who is also bishop of Rome. It has never been a purely Protestant body, but even in its early beginnings included Anglicans, who do not always like to be called Protestant, and Orthodox churches. In WCC's Faith and Order commission and some other projects, Roman Catholics are full members and have been since that great council, Vatican II (1962–1965), which committed the Church of Rome to participating in the global ecumenical movement, where it had previously been suspicious. The fact that it is organized internationally is one major reason why it would be difficult for the Church of Rome ever to become a member of the WCC as it is now structured. I shall explain later that we are exploring other options like the Global Christian Forum in the hope of broadening the spectrum to include Rome and also independent Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. This is a big issue. Half the world's Christians are Roman Catholics, and they can be found in almost every country. Another quarter of the world's Christians are Evangelical and Pentecostal, and in many parts of the world, including South America, these numbers are growing fast.

Why a World Council?

Even in New Testament times, Christians found it necessary and helpful to meet together with other Christians from other places. As recorded in Acts 15, they met together in Jerusalem to sort out one of the early problems of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Though it brought together diverse followers of Jesus from different backgrounds, officially this meeting in Jerusalem is not listed as "the first ecumenical council." This title belongs to Nicaea in 325, which took place after things had developed fur-

ther within the church. Most Christians recognize the first three such councils as part of their own history and tradition. The Eastern Orthodox count the first seven. Rome regards Vatican II as the 21st ecumenical council. What counts as an ecumenical council partly depends on how we define the term "ecumenical." Strictly speaking, but at the risk of being pedantic, the World Council of Churches is not a council. But then "United Nations" does not offer an accurate description of how things function in that organization either. The nations are not united but we wish they were; one purpose of gathering in a UN assembly is to bring nations together to resolve their differences and offer mutual support. The title of the World Council of Churches, too, reflects an aspiration churches are called to live up to. The fourth assembly of the WCC, meeting soon after Vatican II and inspired by its example of reaching out to other Christians, expressed the hope that one day there would be a general or ecumenical council that could speak for all Christians and pave the way into the future.³ Father Cyrill Argenti, an Orthodox priest from France and main speaker at Nairobi, concluded his presentation with the wish that one of the WCC assemblies in the future be recognized as an ecumenical council.

Assemblies of the WCC are held every seven or eight years. The ecumenical councils were only convened when it was thought necessary. It is interesting that this was rarely only for church business. Emperor Constantine summoned the bishops to Nicaea. As the first Christian emperor, he was not a great theologian and was more concerned about the peace of the realm than sound doctrine; however, he could see that the Arian controversy was throwing parts of his empire into confusion, and so he summoned the council for the sake of peace. It is remembered to this day for its statement of faith, the Nicene Creed. Later councils of the church in the West were convened by the popes. They, too, might have had a concern for peace. Just why Pope John XXIII summoned Vatican II will

always be something of a mystery. This prayerful man felt he was inspired by God to do so, but one of his interpreters, Norman Tanner, English editor of *Decrees of the Ecumenical Council*, in his own introduction to Vatican II, quotes Pope John XXIII's promulgation of the Second Vatican Council, "in which the pope publicly and officially summoned the council to meet in 1962 and stated three principal aims of the council, namely: the better internal ordering of the church, unity among Christians, and the promotion of peace throughout the world."⁴ The pope, like all the bishops at the council, had lived through and survived the Second World War. They were now enduring the Cold War and feared a third world war following the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, taking place just as the council began. Peace had to be on the agenda. And so it was for the first WCC assembly at Amsterdam in 1948, as well on the agenda of all other assemblies that followed. Those who criticize the WCC for being more concerned about justice and peace than the unity of the church need to be reminded that there are good precedents. Council agendas were rarely confined to church business. On the other hand, it is fair and necessary to remind the WCC of its divine mandate as stated in the Constitution: "The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe."⁵ So stated, the Constitution may be best understood as a commentary on Jesus' prayer in John 17:21, that all may be one that the world may believe.

The Bible is basic for the ecumenical movement. There we read not only of the Council at Jerusalem but also of Paul's missionary journeys and visits to different churches and the collection he raised among Gentile congregations for the poor in Jerusalem. This, too,

provides a precedent for why we need a global coordinating body like a World Council. Paul's collection sets an example of what came to be known soon after the Second World War as the Inter-Church Aid and Refugee Service. His pastoral care for different congregations as reflected in most of his letters sets the pattern for visits to member churches by the WCC general secretary and for teams of people appointed by the WCC to act as living letters (2 Cor. 3:2-3) when they meet with churches in troubled places and offer the support and solidarity of the wider fellowship. A good example of a pilgrimage of faith.

This study focuses on assemblies, but it is important to remember that what each assembly brings to the delegates is the result of what the WCC's governing bodies have carefully considered and decided and what the WCC programmes have been doing since last they met. One vital way we can all join in is through prayer. Jesus' prayer for the coming kingdom bids us embrace the whole world and its churches. Many of us use the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle, prepared and published by the WCC, and, week by week, in our local congregation, pray for every country and every church, in turn.

Why Not?

Answering why, where, and what questions could easily become a defence of the status quo. The World Council of Churches, like its member churches, is in constant need of reform, and at its best admits this. That is why in a final chapter I explore some of the issues raised by young theologians from different continents who were invited to offer "Proposals for Ecumenism in the Twenty-First Century," and why I describe experiments with new structures such as the Global Christian Forum. I will also revisit the question that popular popes like John XXIII and Francis provoke, namely: "Could there be a 'pope for all Christians'?" Today's global media

loves a good pope, whereas it cannot cope with a good council, Vatican II notwithstanding.

People or Places, Topics or Towns?

Readers of this book may easily be confused because I do not report everything that happened everywhere the WCC met. This is because I am trying to demonstrate how relevant the WCC was in the past and is for our Christian life, here and now. To do this, I select ten major issues dealt with in ten assemblies. Each assembly discussed many more topics, some of them frankly boring. If you were a delegate you might like people to know that you were elected to one of the key committees or how much your church pays, but if not, who cares?

At the start of each chapter I shall offer a brief introduction to that assembly but then select one or two key themes that 70 years later remain significant landmarks in our ecumenical pilgrimage of faith. Most of the big themes were dealt with in more than one assembly. Does the place where these discussions are held matter? I went to Brazil in 2006 but saw very little of Brazil. It was still important to be there, not least to show that we, the world church, care about Brazil and have read about it and prayed for it. Pilgrims on a journey press on because of the welcome and hospitality they receive from strangers. In the ecumenical movement we move on to different places because of encouragement from people in Porto Alegre, Harare, and Busan, who were so glad we came, through our representatives. Many have lived through tough times and, thanks to our visit, no longer feel alone. Notice how important hospitality is for God's pilgrim people in Bible lands. The kindness of strangers is never to be taken for granted as we journey on from place to place, project to project, never finally at home anywhere except at last in heaven, but even now in Christ with his different disciples.

Tomorrow?

I am very conscious that everything I write becomes dated the moment it is written. A remedy is close at hand on our laptops, phones, and iPads. The WCC provides almost daily online information on its activities. Its quarterly journal *The Ecumenical Review* is accessible online and will keep you well informed on current thinking, usually with a specific concern for each issue. The Ecumenical Prayer Cycle – in both its print edition, *Pilgrim Prayer: The Ecumenical Prayer Cycle*, and its weekly posting of prayers – can be read in relation to weekly bulletins from the WCC where the council's response to issues facing different regions of the world are highlighted. Compare what you read in this global publication with the prayers in your local congregation before you say "Amen" too quickly. Too often we act and pray as though our church is the only church. We pray for the world but not for the world church. Roman Catholics always pray for the pope. Let us pray for the pope, for all heads of churches, all Christian communities, *and* the World Council of Churches. They need our prayers, and prayers should be well informed. May this book help you to pray.