

Eden Grace's reflections from the World Council of Churches 9th Assembly, Porto Alegre Brazil

Section I

[Received 14 February]
[written on Tuesday, 7 February 2006]

Greetings to all friends!

I am writing to you from Nairobi as I embark tonight to travel to Porto Alegre, Brazil, where the World Council of Churches 9th Assembly is about to begin. I am traveling with a young Kenyan woman named Jane Mutoro, and she and I are hoping to write daily updates and reflections on the Assembly. I have included you in the distribution list, and hope you will enjoy these messages, and will find ways to share the experience of the Assembly within your local community. Feel free to forward these messages to anyone else who might be interested.

The theme of the Assembly is phrased as a prayer -- "God, in your grace, transform the world". [As things get underway, you can follow the Assembly with the daily postings at www.wcc-assembly.info](http://www.wcc-assembly.info). You might want to use the daily bible studies, or read some of the feature stories about the themes of grace and transformation from varied contexts around the world. Several of the songs we will be learning are posted on the web site, for you to use in your churches and families.

Please keep Jane and me -- and all those thousands who are traveling -- in your thoughts and prayers, and walk with us in the next few weeks as we seek to know God ever more deeply through the remarkable fellowship of the World Council of Churches.

In Christian friendship,
Eden

[Received 14 February]

Dear friends,

Greetings from Porto Alegre! I pray that you all are well. Jane and I arrived here safely, with no delays or troubles at all. After two very long flights, we had a sound sleep and have not been bothered by jet lag at all.

The Assembly officially begins tomorrow morning. However, we have already had three days of Pre-Assembly activities. Jane has been participating in the Pre-Assembly Youth Event, and I

have been splitting my time between the Youth Meeting, the Women's Meeting, and volunteering at the registration desk.

It has been exciting to come together after so many months (and years) of preparation, and there is a great sense of anticipation in the air, to see what God will do with this tremendous gathering of faithful people. I am personally very energized by seeing so many people who were in Harare or whom I have come to know in the intervening years of WCC involvement. This may be a fellowship of churches in the formal sense, but it is also most powerfully a fellowship of loving people.

I have spent these last few days with many questions in my mind about my identity. My name badge says "Kenya", and indeed I live in Kenya. Yet I am not an African. When do I identify with the North Americans and when with the Africans? I don't feel quite right in either place. Jane and I had a fascinating conversation about what qualifies someone to call themselves "African". I think I will carry this question with me throughout the entire Assembly. For instance, which regional meeting do I attend?

Similarly, I have questions about my role as an outgoing "youth" member of the Central Committee. I have been sitting in on the youth events, but I am no longer technically a youth. I have mostly been keeping quiet in those meetings, and the one time I did speak, I was not at all sure afterwards that it was the right thing to do. I am torn between wanting to support the youth by advising them on strategies for promoting their interests in the business procedures of the WCC, yet on the other hand not behaving as if the youth are not fully capable of acting in their own interests.

Yesterday I spent the day praying Psalm 141:3 -- "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips." I think I need this prayer every day of my life!!!

I have not been at all sure, over the last few months, what role I will play in this Assembly. My category of participation is "Advisor to the Delegation", which means that I am a formal advisor to Ben and Jane, and less formally to Katie and Alex. I have also been invited to serve on the Assembly Finance Committee, I assume in continuity with my membership on the Finance Committee of the Central Committee.

As many of you know, I have had a strong personal interest in the development of the consensus procedures in the WCC. Yet I had not been contacted about playing any role in that regard at the Assembly. It remained a mystery to me whether I had been intentionally excluded, or unintentionally overlooked, or lost in the inevitable chaos of Assembly administration. I have been reluctant to ask anyone whether I might help in some way, in case the decision had been made to exclude me for some reason. However, I discovered yesterday that the third scenario is the case -- they never communicated with me the fact that they have appointed me to be Recorder (i.e. Recording Clerk) of the Assembly! This is, of course, a HUGE task that I am tremendously honored to accept. It is typical of the WCC that each office thinks the other has been in communication, so I'm not really surprised to find this out now. But it isn't something I've had

time to prepare for, and I will need to center in prayer in a different way than if I were primarily focused on advising Ben, Jane, Katie and Alex. I'm excited for the challenge!!

After two days of heady and energizing meetings with the youth and women, but not really fully engaging with either group, I spent all day today at the Registration Desk. What a wonderfully grounding experience! Answering questions, solving problems, thinking on my feet, all day long. (Standing on my feet too, which are now quite sore!) I'm so glad to have had the chance to help the staff, who are clearly stressed to the breaking point. Again, I come back to the theme that the WCC is about people, and the WCC staff have become dear to me over these last eight years. I will really miss them a lot when I finish my term of service at the end of this Assembly.

Tomorrow, we officially open the Assembly with orientation and worship. I hope to be able to send short updates on various issues and experiences, as the days unfold. In the meantime, please keep me, and all those gathered here, close in your prayers. Also, pray for those whose travel has been disrupted by uncooperative weather in the northern hemisphere.

I pray that you are well, in whatever your context, and that you can also feel the blessings of community around you.

In love,
Eden

[Received 17 February 2006]

Reflections on the first three days (14-16 February)

Dear friends,

What full and exciting days we're having! It is difficult to find a free moment for reflection, let alone writing emails to you all. Right now I'm sitting in the back of the auditorium as we discuss new strategies for mission and evangelism a topic of deep interest to me! Yet I'm dividing my attention by trying to catch you all up on what's happening here.

First, I should respond to a request from one of you that I name the **Quakers** here. Here's who we are, and the various roles we have in this Assembly:

Ben Richmond, Indiana Yearly Meeting, delegate from Friends United Meeting

Jane Mutoro, Elgon Religious Society of Friends, delegate from Friends United Meeting

Alex Kern, New England Yearly Meeting, delegate from Friends General Conference

Katie Aven, delegate from Canadian Yearly Meeting

Tom Paxson, Illinois Yearly Meeting, Advisor to the FGC delegation, and member of the Decade to Overcome Violence US-based Steering Committee

Myself, New England Yearly Meeting, Advisor to the FUM delegation, and member of the outgoing Central Committee

Oliver Kisaka Simiyu, Nairobi Yearly Meeting, representing the National Council of Churches of Kenya (where he serves as Deputy General Secretary)

Esther Mombo, Bware Yearly Meeting, Academic Dean of St Paul's Theological College Limuru

Margaret Fraser, Britain Yearly Meeting, representing Friends World Committee for Consultation

Janet Scott, Britain Yearly Meeting, member of the WCC Commission on Faith & Order

Beth Ferris, New York Yearly Meeting, WCC staff member

James Woolgrove, Britain Yearly Meeting, representing a coalition of ecumenical justice and advocacy movements (together with wife Sara Speicher, a Brethren who fellowships with Friends, and their baby David)

a woman (who I haven't met yet) from Central and Southern Africa Yearly Meeting, representing the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme for Palestine and Israel

Allison Kelley, Britain Yearly Meeting, representing Christian Aid

maybe there are others too, but we haven't found each other! There are almost 5,000 people here, so it's a challenge to know who is here.

Of course, we are working closely with our Mennonite and Brethren brothers and sisters, especially on issues of peace and non-violence. More about that further down.

A break in my writing -- it is now the next day (Friday), and I'm skipping a session in order to try to catch up on correspondence. It is impossible to stay on top of everything! None of us are getting enough sleep.

Let me start with some comments on the **worship** life of the Assembly. Worship, prayer and music are always at the center of Assembly life, and the thing participants find most rewarding overall. After the Special Commission worked so hard on the Orthodox critique of ecumenical worship, I was a bit nervous about what we would be able to do here. I needn't have worried. We are gathered in an enormous colorful circus tent and joined by a huge Brazilian choir. The worship materials are diverse and creative, drawing on a wide range of traditions and cultures. The opening worship, though too long, was powerful in gathering us together through symbol, song, scripture and litany. The sermon by Archbishop Anastasios (one of my ecumenical heroes), was dry in its delivery but powerful in its content, and worth reading on the web if you can. I feel spiritually nourished and energized here, which is a real cause for celebration!

The first day of the Assembly always involves hearing formal addresses from the **Moderator and General Secretary**. These are long, theological and academic papers, delivered in a rather dry manner, and can sometimes feel a bit frustrating when what we're hungering for is dynamic interaction as a diverse fellowship of Christians. However, I've heard enough reports of this type to know that they can have a profound impact on the programmatic decisions of the Assembly, so they are worth reading carefully.

The Moderator's themes included: the theme and context of the Assembly; the essence of the

church as a missionary reality (a “church for others” vs. self perpetuation); religious plurality and openness to the “other” on their own terms; renewal of ecumenism for the 21st century; the dialectic between Christian unity and a credible justice witness; consensus as change of ethos, not just a change of rules; the need to reclaim/restate the fundamental goals of the ecumenical movement; violence as a major ecumenical concern; the decisive role of youth in this Assembly and in the churches; and three concrete steps which he believes are achievable right now (mutual recognition of baptism, common date for Easter, and a comprehensive global event of all Christians from all traditions).

The General Secretary’s themes included: the centrality of spirituality in the ecumenical movement; the importance of youth; the concept of transformative justice; the struggle to overcome poverty in Africa; the current status of ecumenical relationships; a summary of the four core areas of our work together (faith, spirituality and mission; ecumenical formation; transformative justice; and being a moral voice in the world); and the encouragement to be creative and take risks together.

Some notable sound bites:

“The church’s approach to violence must be proactive and not reactive. Non-violence must be considered as a powerful strategy and an active approach to overcoming violence. The church must preach tolerance, mutual openness and acceptance. Our Christian vocation is to become agents of God’s reconciliation, healing and transformation. Others’ strategy is “war on terror”; ours is “overcoming violence”; others’ objective is “security”, even by military intervention; ours is peace with justice and the promotion of mutual understanding and trust.” (Moderator, par. 26.f)

“Progressively, Afro-pessimism is being replaced by guarded optimism on the part of African churches and African people ... But in the final analysis, Africa remains a paradoxical continent: Africa is extremely rich yet full of extremely poor people. ... In the last thirty years, a staggering \$330 billion have been poured into Africa. So why is Africa in its present predicament? This one thing we have observed: financial aid alone is not the answer to overcoming poverty in Africa; it is too easily misconceived, misdirected, misregulated or misapplied. It will take a level and depth of anger, indeed of righteous indignation, similar to that which produced the spirit of Pan-Africanism in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid, to overcome poverty in Africa. The Africans on the continent and the African diaspora will have to come together again under the rubric of a kind of *global Africana* and say: it cannot go on like this because what is at stake is the core of what it means to be African -- the African soul! And that requires more than material aid to recover.” (General Secretary, par. 53-54)

Our opening business also included formal adoption of the necessary changes in the **Constitution and Rules** in order to make consensus decision-making normative for the Council. Also, the Special Commission’s work on membership is reflected in a change in the membership Rule. Friends will, of course, be happy about the consensus change. I want to draw your attention to the membership changes. It was important to many churches that there be more explicit

theological criteria for membership in the Council. There is, therefore, a new list of criteria. Some of the items on this list might look alarming to Friends on first reading. However, you should note the sentence which precedes the list, which requires that churches *give an account* of their faith and witness in relation to the criteria, NOT that churches conform or assent to the criteria. I personally feel like it is important for Friends to re-articulate from time to time our theological bases for ecumenical engagement, as much for our own benefit as for the sake of the other churches. The new membership criteria give us one opportunity to do that. A document that is coming later in the Assembly regarding Christian unity has some very pointed questions at the end which are another opportunity for self-reflection. I throw them out there in case anyone is looking for a theological project!

As always, this Assembly will issue statements on various **Public Issues**. Six statements have been proposed by the Executive Committee, and there is a possibility for additional proposals to come from the floor. The six we have in front of us in draft form are on: Latin America; The Responsibility to Protect; Terrorism; UN Reform; Water; and Nuclear Disarmament. There's some discussion about also making a statement on the "cartoon" controversy, but I don't know if this will be accepted.

The statement on **Responsibility to Protect** (a.k.a. humanitarian intervention) has a long history, going back to the Potsdam Central Committee in 2001, where the Historic Peace Churches had serious reservations about the version that was presented then. It was not approved in Potsdam, and has undergone two rounds of revisions since, and been sent to the churches twice for formal comment. The Historic Peace Churches meeting in Bienenberg in 2001 made a contribution to that process. The document we have now is much better, but from a Peace Church perspective it still needs work. Our Quaker, Mennonite and Brethren delegates have been working intensively for the last two days to formulate our suggestions. Fernando Enns is our representative on the committee, and we trust that he will represent our concerns well. We should have some idea tomorrow of how many of our recommended changes will be accepted. But the bigger question, in my mind, is not so much about the wording of the document as about our overall strategy as a Peace Church. The core thrust of the document is to describe the ethical limits on armed humanitarian intervention. The international community is hungry for an articulation of these limits. However, this purpose inevitably implies that there are certain (extremely limited) situations in which armed force is justified. I personally feel that we Quakers can't approve such a document, but that we ought not to kill it either. It seems, to me, like a situation for "standing aside". However, I'm not a delegate, so I don't have to face this difficult personal discernment of conscience. As matters unfold, I'll let you know what kind of support our delegates need in order to decide how to act.

I am appointed as an Advisor to the **Finance Committee** of the Assembly (in continuity with my role on the Finance Committee of the Central Committee). I continue to find this a very rewarding task. The Finance staff of the Council are of the highest quality, and the overall financial transparency and solvency of the Council has improved dramatically. I enjoy the concrete nature of the finance work, and find it to be a nice contrast with the "ethereal" quality of

much of the other discussions of the Assembly.

Thursday afternoon we had a plenary session on **Economic Justice**. I will confess that I didn't give it my full attention, since Gregor Henderson (my co-Recorder) and I were working to get ourselves organized for our task for the following session. Yet my impression (confirmed in discussion with many other people afterwards) was that it was a disappointing plenary. It was full of the same rhetoric we have been using since Harare, without taking us further in either analysis or concrete proposals. Some people wanted more theology. Some wanted more hard economics. Some wanted more grassroots examples of alternatives. I'm not sure what it will take to move the WCC's programme on economic justice to the next level, or even what that level looks like, but I have the distinct impression that we have reached a "plateau" and need some sort of jolt. What will this be? Will it come this week? From what quarter? I'm on the look-out.

I had dinner last night with about a dozen people from **Massachusetts**, and really enjoyed reconnecting with that community. I miss my fellowship with the Massachusetts Council of Churches. Through the last eight years on the WCC Central Committee, the Mass Council was a grounding place for me, where ecumenism was made real at the grass roots. Meeting last night with those folks made me wonder about making some local ecumenical connections in Kenya, to try to ground my ecumenical commitment in my new local context.

This morning our Bible Study groups were cancelled so that we could have a special session in which we received the **President of Brazil**. He spoke to us for about a half hour, focusing on his commitments to poverty reduction and education reform in Brazil, and asking the churches to take the lead in civil society movements for change. He thanked the WCC for "hosting" Paulo Freire, Brazilian liberation theologian, when he was forced into exile several decades ago. It was striking to me that he never mentioned environmental or Indigenous concerns, considering the pressing problems of the Amazon region. But it was a very gracious and ceremonial occasion, without any opportunity for questions or dialogue. Certainly it was a less bizarre experience than when we received Robert Mugabe at the Harare Assembly!

Later today I'll attend the Africa Regional Meeting, and tomorrow we'll have our official Quaker meeting. This afternoon we have a plenary on Christian Identity and Religious Plurality. I'll report on these, and other activities, in my next email. You can follow all of this on the Assembly web site: www.wcc-assembly.info.

In the meantime, you are in my prayers, and I thank you for holding this Assembly in your prayers as well.

Blessings,
Eden

[Received 17 February 2006]

Dear Friends,

A quick note to say that we just concluded a FANTASTIC plenary on Christian Identity and Religious Plurality. The main address was from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, followed by responses from Myanmar Baptist and Greek Orthodox perspectives. Then three interfaith visitors gave short responses. All the speeches were really terrific, but I particularly recommend that you read the three from Rowan Williams, Anna May Chain and Assaad Elias Kattan.

You can find them all here:

[1. http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/plenary-presentations/theme-plenary-2.html](http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/plenary-presentations/theme-plenary-2.html)

Blessings to you all!
Eden

[Received 18 February 2006]

Dear friends,

This morning we had a deep and spirit-filled worship, focusing on the theme of today, which is "God, in your Grace, transform our **lives**." We contemplated a painting/icon showing Jesus rising from the dead and breaking the chains of oppression and the weapons of violence, liberating the whole of creation from its various forms of bondage. The scriptures were Psalm 143 and 2 Corinthians 12:6-10. The litanies and music were from the Orthodox liturgy of the resurrection.

We concluded with a powerful prayer. (Thanks for Ben Richmond for typing it in!) We then went to our Bible study groups, where we brought Mark 10:32-45 and Phillipians 2:1-11 into the day's spiritual theme. The Phillipians text is particularly precious to me, and indeed today I feel "poured out" for the sake of Christ's saving work in the world.

I offer you this prayer for today, and invite you to pray alongside us today and throughout our days here in Porto Alegre.

Lord, let us accept calmly all that this day might bring us
and let us devote ourselves completely to Your sacred will.
Direct us and help us each hour of this day.
Control our thoughts and feelings in all our deeds and words.
When unpredictable circumstances arise,

do not let us forget that everything comes from You.
Teach us to be just towards our brothers and sisters,
never to provoke wrath or cause sorrow.
Control our will and teach us to pray, to believe,
to hope, to suffer, to forgive and to love.
Lord, let us be an instrument of Your peace,
where there is hatred, let us spread love,
where there are insults -- forgiveness,
where there is discord -- unity,
hope where there is despair,
light where there is darkness,
joy where there is sadness.
O, Divine Teacher, let us give, rather than receive, consolation,
let us understand others, rather than be understood,
let us love others, rather than be loved.
For when we forgive, we are forgiven,
when we give, we receive and when we die,
we are born into eternal life.
Holy Spirit, help us to dedicate this day to our Lord and Saviour.
Lord Jesus, Son of God, it is better not to live than to live without You.
We thank you, God, for the gift of this day
and for all the good deeds that You will help us do today.
Give us courage to serve You worthily,
to place justice above profit,
the realization of noble deeds above momentary pleasures,
to put others before ourselves
and to fulfill Your commandment to love.
Let the light of Your beauty, goodness and love shine in us.
Amen.

In Christian love,
Eden

[Received 18 February 2006]

Dear friends,

Some of you have written asking how the "Recorder" work is going. Let me give you an update, and thank you for your prayers for this aspect of my work here.

The Recorder is distinct from the Minute Taker. Diane Kessler, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches (and my ecumenical mentor) is serving as Minute Taker, which means that she notes everything that is said in Plenary Sessions, and writes a "narrative" of our deliberations. She is working extremely hard, and could use your prayer support!

Gregor Henderson (Uniting Church in Australia) and I are the Recorders. Our job is to formulate, in very precise language, the Resolutions which the Assembly is asked to decide by consensus. Our work is projected onto huge screens throughout the building and translated into five languages. The delegates are asked to make decisions on the language they see on the screen.

So far, in the Assembly, we have had very few decision-making sessions. The rhythm of the Assembly goes something like this: First, we listen to major speeches on important topics and themes. We then offer our reflections and feedback in plenary session and in smaller groups on the material presented. The presentations and discussions are then processed by the Assembly committees. Finally, the Assembly makes decisions on all the various matters, as recommended by the committees

Therefore, with the exception of the Constitutional changes, we have made no decisions yet at this Assembly. We are still in the mode of receiving and digesting inputs. Therefore, my job has not yet been demanding.

However, starting on Monday afternoon, and extending through Thursday afternoon, Gregor and I will be in a very visible, very high-pressure role! I will keep you posted on how it goes, and I will certainly appreciate your prayers during those demanding days.

Thanks for your concern and support!

Blessings,
Eden