

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

Section III

[Received 2 March 2006]

[Sorry, this was delayed several days due to technical difficulties.]

Dear friends,

My apologies for not writing sooner! The Assembly ended the day before yesterday, and I spent yesterday sleeping, walking around the city, and organizing my suitcases. Right now, I'm in the airport in Porto Alegre, waiting to depart for Sao Paulo, then Amsterdam, then Nairobi, then Kisumu. God willing, I'll be home by Monday mid-morning, Kenyan time.

Let me start with the end -- closing worship. It was amazing. Closing worship is always an emotional experience at any conference, since we all have so many new thoughts, feelings, relationships, experiences, questions, commitments, confusions, etc that need to be integrated as we return to "normal" life. For me, it marked the end of my eight years on the WCC, and therefore was extremely emotional. Rev. Robina Winbush, from the Presbyterian Church USA, was the preacher, and boy did she preach!! I'll send you the whole text of her sermon in a separate message, and I encourage you to read it. It represents a summary of what we did here in Porto Alegre better than I could ever manage.

At the end of her sermon, Robina asked us if we are, each of us, "willing to be a leaf on the tree of life, whom God uses for the healing of the nations?" I, and many others, stood and yelled out YES! (You have to read the whole sermon to appreciate the emotional intensity that culminated in that moment.)

When Robina finished and the worship moved into the next hymn, I sat down and began crying. Sobbing. Racked with sobs. Sobs I didn't understand, that didn't have any cognitive basis at all. I didn't even know what emotion I was feeling. It was a tremendous release. I sobbed until the papers in my lap were soaked with tears. I didn't try to stop myself. I wasn't embarrassed as people came to put an arm around me or offer me tissues, and the media people took pictures of me. I just gasped and howled and sobbed. (For those of you who know me, all of this is entirely out of character!)

After a while, I began to be able to form thoughts about what I was experiencing. I felt that the YES I had yelled out was not strong enough for the YES in my soul -- that there was no way to

scream loud enough, to jump high enough, to pray fervently enough to exhaust the YES of my heart, the YES of my life. I wanted to pour out YES through every fibre of my being.

At the same time, I knew the my YES was made possible through the shared YES of the gathering, of the WCC and the people who make it so special. Robina talked about how the leaf of healing is attached to the tree of life, and for me, one of my life-trees is the WCC. And I'm leaving the WCC. My term is over, and it will go on without me. So there were tears of gratitude and of loss, of connection and isolation. It was sorrow and joy together.

It felt GREAT to cry like that. At the end of the worship we all stayed in the tent, singing the songs of the Assembly and dancing and hugging each other, and I felt so good and real and pure and present. What a gift!

So, having shared with you my personal experience of the end of the Assembly, let me back up and tell you about the business of the last day.

There are always a huge number of decisions to make on the last day. Sometimes this gets very chaotic and people can feel manipulated. I'd say that the consensus procedure helped us to stay centered on the task, to ward off the worst of the self-serving speech-making, and to move through the business in an orderly way. We even finished early!!

We completed the work on public issues, programme priorities, ecclesiology, and policy issues. I'll give you summaries and sound bites of the public issues statements in another email. The result of it all is that the peace church perspective was very much heard and appreciated, and we had a large impact on the final content of several of the statements.

The new Central Committee met after the closing worship, and elected the new Executive Committee and moderators of the Council. The moderators are:

Moderator -- Rev. Dr Walter Altmann is the president of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB).

Vice Moderator -- Metropolitan Dr Gennadios of Sassima (Limouris), of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Turkey)

Vice Moderator -- Rev. Dr Margaretha Hendriks-Ririmasse, dean of the Theological Faculty of the Indonesian Christian University in Moluccas

The full list of the Executive Committee is found at <http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/news-media/news/english-news/article/1801/new-wcc-central-committee.html>

The Assembly adopted an ecclesiology text as a way of stimulating study, reflection and engagement between the churches on the theological issues that continue to divide Christians from each other. There was some problematic sacramental language in the text, but the Quaker delegation managed to including the wording from the Canberra "Koinonia" statement which

acknowledges that we share in the spiritual reality of the sacraments even though we do not practice the outward rites. I have mixed feelings about this strategy (see my talk at Intermountain Yearly Meeting for more on that: <http://www.edengrace.org/witness.html>). However, it should at least prevent the sacraments from being a "red herring" in our Quaker discussions, and -- I hope! -- allow us to engage meaningfully with the substance of the document. There are a series of questions at the end, which every church is required to respond to before the 10th Assembly. So, we have about 7 years to discuss and discern on these questions. In my opinion, we can find real spiritual nourishment and renewal through this sort of a discussion process (similar to process of responding to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" document). Unfortunately, the Assembly web site is in a bit of disarray, so I can't find the link to the document. As soon as I find it, I'll send it to you all, so we can begin thinking about a process for discussing the questions.

The Programme Guidelines Committee at this Assembly did a much better job than in Harare! (I can say that because I was on the Harare committee.) The task is enormously difficult -- the committee has to receive input from every corner of the Assembly, and to pull all the programmatic work of the Council into one coherent goal, with clear priorities for the future. In Harare, we were under so much pressure to "enhance" or "strengthen" the work in every conceivable aspect, that we did no prioritizing at all. We simply listed everything the Council does as being essential. Then the Central Committee was faced with having to make use of a dismal document. By contrast, this Assembly was very well served by a clear and strong set of recommendations from the Programme Guidelines Committee, which also were very coherent with the recommendations from the Finance Committee, stressing the need to sharpen the focus of the Council and only do those things that only the WCC can do best (i.e. those things that must be done at a global level).

We approved two very helpful lists as overall guidance to the Council, as follows

Seven basic principles to guide the WCC in setting its programme priorities in the future:

- § to keep its focus upon what the WCC uniquely might do as a global fellowship of churches in providing leadership to the whole of the ecumenical movement;
- § to do less, to do it well, in an integrated, collaborative and interactive approach;
- § to lift up its central task of the churches calling one another to visible unity;
- § to keep in tension the work of dialogue and advocacy, of building relationships and promoting social witness among churches and with different sectors in society;
- § to foster greater ownership and participation by the churches in building as much as possible on initiatives of the churches and partner organizations;
- § to bring a prophetic voice and witness to the world in addressing the urgent and turbulent issues of our times in a focused way;
- § to communicate WCC activities to the churches and the world in a timely and imaginative way.

Six methodological principles for WCC work:

- § articulating a clear theological basis for all of its work;

- § developing a comprehensive planning, monitoring and evaluation process that will include a clear time-line and goals;
- § designing a strategy for communication, engagement and ownership by the churches;
- § facilitating the coordinating role of the WCC in seeking partnerships in networking and advocacy with other ecumenical organizations, including Christian World Communions, REOs, NCCs, Specialized Ministries, faith-based organizations, and NGOs (as appropriate) with the hope that many of these programmes can be implemented in collaborative ways of working;
- § encouraging capacity-building of member churches and ecumenical partners;
- § accompanying churches and peoples in critical situations and enabling and facilitating their action.

The Committee then proposed four major areas of engagement:

- Unity, Spirituality and Mission
- Ecumenical Formation
- Global Justice
- Public Voice and Prophetic Witness to the World

All these points were well elaborated in the report, and will be extremely helpful to the new Central Committee as it tries to figure out how the Council can do well what it does best, on fewer and fewer financial resources.

The Policy Reference Committee has a fairly amorphous task, but a lot of its work at this Assembly focused on the ecclesiology text. In addition to that, the committee recommended (and the Assembly approved):

- that we make substantial, visible progress toward church unity before the 10th Assembly;
- that the Council continue the "reconfiguration" process, focused on a greater coherence and less duplication of effort among the many actors in the ecumenical movement;
- that we continue to work toward a greater integration of the programme areas of the Council;
- that we create a new Youth Commission (the role of this body to the overall life of the Council is, in my observation, analogous to the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation, and should therefore have a much greater impact than the Youth Advisory Committee we've always had)
- that we continue to build on the amazing progress that has been made by the Ecumenical Disability Advocacy Network;
- that we improve our coordination with the Christian World Communion bodies, with the thought that the 10th Assembly might meet concurrently with the Assemblies of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches;
- that the work of the Joint Working Group with the Roman Catholic Church and the Joint Consultative Group with the Pentecostals be affirmed and continued
- that we continue to work toward a global Forum of all Christians

The final message of the Assembly takes the form of a prayer. I'll send it to you in a separate message.

I have to board a plane now, so I'll send this and write more if I think of things I've forgotten to include. In the meantime, thanks for all your prayers and support.

In Christian fellowship,
Eden

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You can find this message on the web site at:

1. <http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/sermons/robina-marie-winbush-closing-sermon.html>

I believe Robina intends to make a few small edits to this text, but this is very close to what she actually said. It's was one of the most powerful messages I've ever heard. I hope the spirit comes through in writing. Just imagine a large black woman preaching, and enjoy!!

FOR THE HEALING OF THE NATIONS

Revelation 22: 1 – 5

Rev. Robina Marie Winbush, Presbyterian Church (USA)

1 “For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelations in an Age of Conflict”, Justo L. Gonzáález (Orbis Books Maryknoll, NY 1999)

To the Moderator, Vice Moderators, Presidents, General Secretary and Staff, Delegates, Representatives, Observers, Friends, my sisters and brothers in Christ and creation, I greet you this afternoon in the Name of and with the awesome joy of Jesus – the One who is now and forever, the Head of the Church.

Would you join me in prayer? (Extemporaneous prayer)

I've known rivers :

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when the dawns were young.

I built my hut by the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers.

Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.¹

In the classic poem by Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes writes to remind a people who had been enslaved that their history began long before 1619, when their ancestors who had survived the horrors of the Middle Passage and were brought in chains to the Americas ... he writes to remind them theirs is not a legacy of enslavement, but their history began along the rivers of Africa and they were connected to a people and carried within their spiritual DNA the rich resources of a people and land from whom they had been separated.

As we prepare to leave Porto Alegre and the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, concluding a week of phenomenal worship, edifying Bible studies, challenging plenaries, long committee meetings and business sessions, motivating offerings in the mutirao, meeting, greeting and networking with sisters and brothers of a common faith and common family, we pause for just one more opportunity to see if there is one more “word from the Lord.” Something that we can carry home with us ... not another piece of paper, not a wristband or souvenir, not another book or media resource, but something that we can carry deep within our spiritual reservoir that will allow the energy, the renewal, the commitments not to be lost in the busyness and routines of our lives when we return home.

I was initially drawn to the Revelation text, because of the baptismal and Eucharistic images and the eschatological themes of new and transformed world. I thought that it would be an appropriate ending to an Assembly that had prayed and sought to understand the transforming power of God. What greater transformation than a vision of the New Jerusalem and the eschatological promises given to us through John’s vision?!

John, the writer of Revelation has been exiled to an island called Patmos and writes to a people living under persecution and domination by the Roman empire that their current reality is not the definitive word of God. They are part of a larger cosmic plan and he writes to remind them theirs is not the seduction of the empire, but ultimately the victory of the Divine and the reign of Christ. Nester Miguez notes “Revelation is written and originally read in a situation of powerlessness. John of Patmos and his readers live in a situation in which they are the subjects of an imperial power that admits no dissent ... The small communities of Christians in Asia Minor do not constitute any real challenge to Roman power, but if they manifest any kind of symbolic opposition to the Emperor’s claim to unchecked dominion they are in trouble. And that is the case in Revelation.”² Miguez notes that “when read under that condition Revelation gives a message that is quite different from its use by the powerful and mighty”. Miguez suggests that the original intention of Revelation as a challenge to imperial power was co-opted when the Christian church became the Church of the Empire and the missionary enterprise became the partner (willing or not) of the expansion of western culture and power.

So we approach the Revelation of Jesus to John on the island of Patmos, both as an eschatological promise of what is to come and as a socio-political-religious critique of the

Roman empire and the empty claims of empire over the eternal assurances of the God of creation and the Resurrected Christ who reigns in victory. John writes of the collusion of systems of economic, military, cultural and yes religious systems that wage war against the Divine, the faithful and all of creation that have not bowed down to the images of the empire's temporal glory. He reminds the churches of Asia Minor, and yes the church universal, that their primary allegiance ... no, our only allegiance must be to the Lamb who was slain, but now reigns upon the throne. We must resist the temptation to be co-opted by systems of domination and exploitation. In the midst of cosmic chaos and global imperial systems, it is a call, a reminder that we are never to abandon our posts as faithful witnesses to the Resurrected Christ - the Living Lord. Ours is never to be an easy, comfortable relationship with empire, but a relationship that measures the work of empire by the self-sacrificing standards of the cross. Brian Blount suggest that "Revelation craves witnesses as engaged, resistant, transformative activism that is willing to sacrifice everything in an effort to make the world over into a reality that responds to and operates from Jesus' role as ruler and savior of all."³

Yes, to read Revelation, is to understand with powerful images, Paul's words to the church at Ephesus, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."⁴

Sue Davies also reminds us that "while John's apocalypse offers fertile ground for identifying the death dealing powers of our own day, he also affirms in the strongest terms God's sovereignty over human and earthly history."⁵ It is this affirmation that I invite you to explore with me this afternoon as we finish packing our spiritual bags to go home.

Yes, Revelation is filled with eschatological hope. However, what if we were to consider that Revelation is not simply a vision of what is to come, but a vision of what is already. We don't have to wait for God to be sovereign - God is sovereign now! John shares with us a glimpse of what is already in the realms beyond our reality and the limitations of our current comprehension. It becomes an invitation to live as though the reign of God and the community of God's beloved kin-dom is already.

When I was a child, there was a simple song we used to sing in my home church, Bethany Presbyterian in Columbus, Ohio. I must admit that we didn't sing it often during formal Sunday worship, but it could be heard during revival or mid-week services or anytime, we would dare to allow ourselves to feel the freedom and power of the Holy Spirit. The words were very simple:

"God is already here. Can't you feel [God's] presence, God's already here. All you have to do is open up your heart, for God is already here."

It carried a simple, but profound message. The God we serve is not far off in some distant realm, but because of the grace of God in the incarnation event, God has chosen to make God's dwelling in the midst of human reality. It isn't that our worlds are perfected, but in the very messiness and problems of human reality, God chooses to dwell.

We have been praying throughout this 9th Assembly, “God, In Your Grace, Transform The World.” It is a prayer that carries as most prayers do, a confession of faith. It is a confession, that we believe that the world needs to be transformed. It is a confession that we believe that the world can be transformed. It is a confession that we believe it is the free gift of God’s love we know as grace that will accomplish the transformation. It is a powerful prayer and a powerful confession.

God through the prophet Isaiah assures us that before we call, God will answer us and while we are yet speaking God hears us.⁶

Would you consider with me the possibility that God has been whispering to our spirits through out this assembly, “I Am Transforming the World”?

We are meeting in the same location as the World Social Forum that has previously declared “Another World is Possible.” As people of faith, as those who claim the name of the Anointed One - Jesus of Nazareth -, we come to give spiritual testimony to that truth.

The final vision that John records is of a world in transformation. John writes of a river not con-taminated with the excess waste of the empire or the cosmic catastrophes, but of a life-giving river that nourishes the earth and all creation. It is a river that can’t not be privatized or exploited for benefit of a few. Unlike Ezekiel’s vision, John’s vision of the river is not restricted to the Temple as God’s dwelling place, but flows freely and directly from the throne of God. Could it be possible that “the river which makes glad the city of God” as described by the Psalmist is not limited or controlled by our ecclesiastical houses, but is the free flowing power of the Spirit of God in our midst? Could it be possible that we who are washed in the baptismal waters of God’s grace and nurtured with the very life force of the Lamb ... the body and blood of the Crucified and Resurrected Christ, are invited to be participants in God’s transforming work of creation?

Unlike the Genesis narrative, the tree of life is no longer inaccessible to humanity, but as it grows alongside the river, drawing from the free flowing Spirit that comes from the presence of God in the midst of the city. Because the tree draws from the river of life, it’s fruit is plentiful and sufficient ... and its leaves are filled with the medicinal qualities that heal and transform nations.

Tell me, have you seen any leaves lately that God is using to heal nations and transform a world? Before we arrived in Porto Alegre, a small group of us stopped by Salvador, Bahia. We were privileged to visit with some powerful women related to the Institute for Theological Education in Bahia (ITEBA). They had formed a group called YAMI - symbolized by cactus growing fruit in the desert. Their’s was a commitment to give voice and agency to Black, Indigenous and Poor women of North-eastern Brazil. They invited us to visit a community center the women were building on land that had been used as a “quilombo.” Quilombos were highly organized communities of Africans that refused to be enslaved when brought to Brazil. This particular

quilombo was named after a black women named Zerefina and she was known for her strong resistance to oppression. The Zerefina Quilombo community center was being built to give voice and agency to the women and children of the sur–rounding community so that they can take control of their own lives. That’s a healing leaf!

In the nightmare of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, instead of waiting for the moral consciousness of northern and western pharmaceutical companies to be awakened, Brazil produces medicines that can be made available for us in countries that cannot afford them ... That’s a healing leaf!

When Cindy Sheehan, a mother whose son was killed in the war on Iraq mobilizes other mothers and families to openly challenge the Bush administration on their corrupt war policies ... That’s a healing leaf!

When a former U.S. military base in Cuba is transformed into a university training over 7’000 medical doctors in Latin America... That’s literally a healing leaf!

When Palestinian Christian youth tell us that they can not be silent in the face of occupation and oppression, they must teach hope and commit themselves to be agents of hope in the midst of violence ... That’s a healing leaf!

When one young persons in Europe believe that they can make a difference and organizes an inter–national movement of youth and young adults who are committed to be changemakers ... That’s a healing leaf!

When we experience the growth of Christianity in Africa and Asia and Latin America and the paradigm shift from a Christianity defined by the rich and powerful ... That’s a healing leaf!

When the World Council of Churches can break the silence and the denial and begin to talk openly and honestly about issues of human sexuality and to facilitate dialogue between and within our churches ... That’s a healing leaf!

When the Ecumenical Disability Advocates’ Network can help us redefine our understanding of healing and wholeness and while everyone may not have the same physical and mental abilities ... all are created in the image of God ... That’s a healing leaf!

I could go on, but I suspect you could testify to the healing leaves that you have experienced and seen.

There is one question I need you to ask before you go. God is transforming the world. Are you willing to be a leaf on the tree of life, whom God uses for the healing of the nations? Are you willing to resist bowing down to the temporal gods of exploitation and domination and allow your life and your churches to be used for the healing of the nations and transformation of the world?

Remember that the power and strength to be a leaf does not belong to you ... it is a result of being attached to the tree of life whose roots are watered by the river of life that flows from the throne of God and the Lamb. When you grow weary and tired, rest assured that the river of life will nourish you.

Yes, the words of Langston Hughes still speak to us...

“I’ve known rivers ... My soul has grown deep like the river.”

1 “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, by Lanston Hughes. Copyright permission pending.

2 Nestor O Miquez, Plurality, Power and Mission

3 Brian K. Blount, Can I Get a Witness: Reading Revelation through African American Culture, Westminster/John Knox Louisville, KY 2005, p. 38

4 Ephesians 6: 12 KJV

5 Susan E. Davies, The Accra Confession: A View From the Belly of the Beast. While here in Porto Alegre, Sue shared with me this paper which was present at a World Alliance of Reformed Churches consultation on Women and Globalization in August 2005 in Jamaica.

6 Isaiah 65: 24

[Received 2 March 2006]

“God, in your Grace, Transform the World”

Message of the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches:

An Invitation to Prayer

Sisters and brothers, we greet you in Christ. As representatives of churches from all the world's regions, we gather in Porto Alegre, Brazil, meeting in the first decade of the third millennium, in the first assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Latin America. We have been invited here to join in a festa da vida, the feast of life. We are praying, reflecting on the scriptures, struggling and rejoicing together in our unity and diversity, and seeking to listen carefully to one another in the spirit of consensus.

Meeting in February 2006, we are made aware by Assembly participants of cries arising daily in their home countries and regions due to disasters, violent conflicts and conditions of oppression and suffering. Yet we are also empowered by God to bear witness to transformation in personal lives, churches, societies and the world as a whole.

Specific challenges and calls to action are being communicated to the churches and the world in

the reports and decisions of the Assembly, such as: the quest for Christian unity; our mid-term call to recommitment to the Decade to Overcome Violence (2001-2010); discernment of prophetic and programmatic means to achieve global economic justice; engagement in inter-religious dialogue; full inter-generational participation of all women and men, and common statements addressing the churches and the world on public issues.

The theme of this Ninth Assembly is a prayer, “God, in your grace, transform the world”. In prayer our hearts are transformed, and so we offer our message as prayer:

God of grace,
together we turn to you in prayer, for it is you who unite us:
you are the one God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - in whom we believe,
you alone empower us for good,
you send us out across the earth in mission and service in the name of Christ.

We confess before you and all people:
We have been unworthy servants.
We have misused and abused the creation.
We have wounded one another by divisions everywhere.
We have often failed to take decisive action against environmental destruction,
poverty, racism, caste-ism, war and genocide.
We are not only victims but also perpetrators of violence.
In all this, we have fallen short as disciples of Jesus Christ
who in his incarnation came to save us and teach us how to love.
Forgive us, God, and teach us to forgive one another.

God, in your grace, transform the world.

God, hear the cries of all creation,
the cries of the waters, the air, the land and all living things;
the cries of all who are exploited, marginalised, abused and victimized,
all who are dispossessed and silenced, their humanity ignored,
all who suffer from any form of disease, from war
and from the crimes of the arrogant who hide from the truth,
distort memory and deny the possibility of reconciliation.
God, guide all in seats of authority towards decisions of moral integrity.

God, in your grace, transform the world.

We give thanks for your blessings and signs of hope that are already present in the world,
in people of all ages and in those who have gone before us in faith;
in movements to overcome violence in all its forms, not just for a decade but for always;
in the deep and open dialogues that have begun both within our own churches and with those of

other faiths in the search for mutual understanding and respect;
in all those working together for justice and peace -
both in exceptional circumstances and every day.
We thank you for the good news of Jesus Christ, and the assurance of resurrection.

God, in your grace, transform the world.

By the power and guidance of your Holy Spirit, O God,
may our prayers never be empty words
but an urgent response to your living Word -
in non-violent direct action for positive change,
in bold, clear, specific acts of solidarity, liberation, healing and compassion,
readily sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.
Open our hearts to love and to see that all people are made in your image,
to care for creation and affirm life in all its wondrous diversity.

Transform us in the offering of ourselves so that we may be your partners in transformation
to strive for the full, visible unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ,
to become neighbours to all,
as we await with eager longing the full revelation of your rule
in the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.

*God, in your grace, transform the world. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
Amen.*