

Item 05-04. Report on the Review of the World Council of Churches.

Recommendation

[The assembly approved Item 05-04, Recommendation 1. See p. 14.]

The General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations recommends that the 215th General Assembly (2003) do the following:

1. Affirm, with gratitude to God, the achievements of the World Council of Churches (WCC) since its founding in 1948, and express its appreciation to the member churches for their participation in this instrument of the ecumenical movement, as we seek to find the unity declared by our Lord Jesus Christ.

[The assembly approved Item 05-04, Recommendation 2. See p. 14.]

2. Express our appreciation to the open and responsive way in which senior staff of the WCC cooperated with our review, providing full information in a timely and collegial fashion.

[The assembly approved Item 05-04, Recommendation 3. See p. 14.]

3. Having heard the gratitude of our partner churches both within North America and around the world for his significant contributions to ecumenism, express our appreciation to our Stated Clerk, the Reverend Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick.

[The assembly approved Item 05-04, Recommendation 4., with amendment. See p. 14.]

4. That the PC(USA) continue to [~~strongly~~] advocate for the WCC's historic commitment to the greater participation of women, youth, and indigenous people in the life of the council [and for the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations to document and report progress being done in that regard in a clear and concise fashion to the next General Assembly following each WCC review].

[The assembly approved Item 05-04, Recommendation 5. See p. 14.]

5. Urge PC(USA) members of the central committee, and others whose participation in the work of the WCC enables them to be heard, to exercise their fiduciary responsibility and insist on work plans and budgeting that keep expenditures and revenues balanced.

[The assembly approved Item 05-04, Recommendation 6., with amendment. See p. 14.]

6. Declare its intent that the PC(USA) shall seek to sustain the level of its support, both financial and in human resources, to the work of the World Council of Churches, while also urging our partner churches to seek every possible way of increasing their support[.] [~~to something more-nearly resembling our level of giving-]~~ [To these ends, we encourage the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations to address the following questions by the next World Council of Churches (WCC) review:

[· Why do so few churches choose to be a part of the WCC?

[· Why do so many member churches choose not to support the WCC financially?

[· What role has the PC(USA) played in creating or perpetuating this situation?

[· Is the WCC perceived by many churches in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, etc. as an essentially Eurocentric or Western institution?]

[· Does the contribution of 98 percent of its funding give to European and North American churches a disproportionate and unjust degree of power within the WCC in relation to larger but less wealthy churches?]

[· If so, how can such inequities be fairly and justly resolved?]

Rationale

A. The Assigned Task

At the 212th General Assembly (2000), and in response to concerns voiced within the General Assembly Council (GAC), the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations (GACER) was asked to design a process “for review of councils and other ecumenical alliances to which the PC(USA) belongs.” The 213th General Assembly (2001) approved the decision, and the 214th General Assembly (2002) received the first such review document, which reported on the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. This year a review team will bring to the assembly the second in the series, a review of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The team who conducted this review included: the Reverend John Bartholomew, Ashley Seaman, and the Reverend Philip Wickeri, (members of the GACER), James Henderson, and the Reverend Heidi Husted.

B. An Historical Summary of Presbyterian Commitment to the World Council of Churches

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor bodies have had an historic commitment to the World Council of Churches (WCC) and they have played an important, if not crucial, role in the formation of that body. Since the nineteenth century, Presbyterians have been involved in ecumenical endeavors including the Missionary Movement, the Student Christian Movement, the various streams that came together in the Life and Work Movement, and the discussions of church unity in the Faith and Order Movement. In 1948, these different streams came together in the formation of the World Council of Churches. In 1961, the International Missionary Council (IMC) was merged with the WCC at its Third Assembly in New Delhi.

The predecessors of PC(USA) were charter members at the WCC’s inception. Individual Presbyterians and predecessor denominations have played leading roles in the formation and subsequent work of the World Council of Churches. For example, John A. Mackay (1889–1983) served as president of the IMC during its most creative years, and was an articulate voice for mission and Christian unity in the World Council of Churches. In 1966, Eugene Carson Blake (1906–1985), Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, was elected general secretary of the WCC to succeed W. A. Visser t’hoft. Over the last fifty years, Presbyterians have held key staff positions in the WCC. Our denomination has played a creative role in the formation and development of many WCC policies and programs, and PC(USA) representatives have served on many WCC commissions and committees.

Presbyterians have played an important role in the history of the WCC in a variety of ways, through the sharing of theological insights from our tradition, the contributions of individual Presbyterians to WCC programs, and the provision of financial and material support. Our members served on the organizing committee of the second WCC assembly at Evanston (1954) and the leadership of our predecessor denominations was instrumental in bringing the IMC into the WCC. We have strongly supported the continuing emphasis on mission and evangelism in the WCC and we have upheld our commitment to the Reformed understanding of the church in faith and order discussions, particularly in the preparation and response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (document produced by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC in 1982). We have contributed to WCC programs aimed at strengthening human rights concerns, women’s concerns, and issues concerned with justice, peace, and the integrity of

creation. We have also played a key role in the interfaith dialogue discussions and relationships with people of other faith traditions.

The PC(USA) is a strong member of the WCC and continues to be well-represented on most of the WCC decision-making bodies. According to one WCC staff person, “We have always been able to count on the sound theological judgment and firm ecumenical commitment of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).”

The confessions of the PC(USA) provide clear foundations for our ecumenical stance and commitment. These, in turn, shape our church’s participation in and commitment to the World Council of Churches. The confessional basis of our ecumenical stance may be summarized in the following four points:

□ *The Vision of the Oneness of the Church.* Reformed and Presbyterian tradition has exhibited, in its classical confessional formulations, a truly catholic and all encompassing understanding of the church. The church is viewed as a single body with Christ as its head (*The Book of Confessions*, Scots Confession, 3.05; 3.16). This church is understood as an apostolic and missionary community (Ibid, Westminster Confession, 6.187, 190; Confession of 1967, 9.31). It is not limited to a given institution or denomination, but exists wherever the true marks of the church are found (Ibid, Second Helvetic Confession, 5.134–.141). We seek to make visible the unity that exists in Christ, so that all may believe. The WCC has always sought to embrace a vision of oneness. Through the Faith and Order Movement, the general mission arms of the WCC, and through our participation, the PC(USA) has influenced the WCC’s position. The PC(USA) has also been influenced by this relationship.

□ *Variations in Church Governance.* The Reformed doctrine of the church does not make any one form of polity essential. However, it does regard polity as necessary to an ordered Christian life. In our theology, it is the church that calls those who are to preach and administer the sacraments and not simply individual initiatives. The World Council of Churches is an instrument of the Church for fulfilling its essential nature and Presbyterians have been able to promote a Reformed understanding of what we believe.

□ *Prudence in Relating Oneness to Unity.* There is always a tension between the sense of the essential unity of the whole Church and the recognition of the difference in polity and practice. The element of prudence has been important for Presbyterians in negotiating the tension between ecumenical diversity and the constructive exercise of polity. Through our participation in the WCC, Presbyterians have helped to encourage a rational and representative decision-making structure in the WCC that does not contravene our basic beliefs, but which rather contributes to the good of the whole.

□ *Reformed Ethos.* This fourth element is really an amalgam of the other three elements, and has a long tradition in our Presbyterian experience and in our participation in ecumenical bodies. Ethos is the collective experience, wisdom, and knowledge of the community. It is neither defined nor promulgated, but is atmospheric and pervasive. It is constantly being challenged, amended, and reconstituted in life. The continuity of Presbyterian commitment in ecumenical bodies such as the WCC rests on our capacity to know our roots and reform ourselves in the direction of the one Church in which we profess to believe.

Based on these four elements from our own confessional tradition, we have the responsibility to bring to and to contribute to the WCC those distinctive elements, which our particular history and tradition have developed in us. In our fifty plus years of involvement in the WCC, we have sought to exercise this responsibility ecumenically.

C. *What Is the Current Nature of the World Council of Churches?*

The WCC has 342 member churches in more than 120 countries. These include most of the Orthodox branch of the Christian family, most of the traditional Protestant and Anglican denominations and a significant number of African initiated and independent churches. Noticeably absent from membership are the Roman Catholic Church and many Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations. The Evangelicals and Pentecostals do share in the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) whose next gathering is in Greece in 2005. In addition, the WCC has informal networking relationships with Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, an ongoing Orthodox-Evangelical dialogue, and a joint consultative group of WCC and Pentecostals, which meets annually. The Roman Catholic Church works closely with the WCC on many issues, and is formally represented in some of the council's work areas. It is a full member of the Faith and Order Commission, and sends observers to nearly all major events.

The WCC is currently in a major time of retrenchment—facing a reduction in staff and program. The financial situation is described later in this report, but it is important first to see what the surviving program is, and what areas of the previous program have had to be merged, reduced, or eliminated.

The structure and governance of the WCC deserves some description and analysis, as part of understanding the council in its multicultural context. “The WCC is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (WCC Constitution). The member churches vary immensely in size, in resources, and in their own patterns of governance. Their theological self-understandings differ: in authority, from strongly hierarchical to very grass-roots democratic; in sacramental hospitality, from tightly restrictive to very open; in ecclesial form, from provisional and therefore changeable to nearly immutable. Some are strongly nationalist in identity and are indeed, established; others find themselves viewed as suspicious or subversive by their national governments.

Governance issues are also complicated by the practicalities of organizing general assemblies of the WCC. From 1948 to the present, there have been eight assemblies. The most practical governance is in the hands of the executive committee of the central committee. The executive committee meets twice a year, while the central committee of 150 members meets every twelve to eighteen months. The PC(USA) has two members on the central committee—Clifton Kirkpatrick and Ashley Seaman. Kirkpatrick also serves on the executive committee. The Reverend Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, serves on the WCC search committee for a general secretary to succeed Konrad Raiser. The WCC exhibits a clear focus on its “Common Understanding and Vision” and programmatic efforts are developed, moving from this broad statement to goals, objectives, and activities in a management pattern that offers great clarity, at least for us for whom western management practices are the norm. Recent actions within the WCC will have a major impact on its method of decision-making and work.

One is the report of the “special commission.” Relations between most of the Orthodox bodies and historical Protestant denominations have been strained in recent years. The Orthodox represents a very large part of the total communicants of WCC member churches. Yet, because voting procedures have tended to reflect recognition by individual member churches, the Orthodox have felt their voice was seriously underrepresented in the decisions of the council. At the same time, some other churches, notably from Europe and North America, have been uncomfortable with the low level of financial support from the Orthodox churches. Many of the Protestant bodies also find themselves frustrated by the lack of progress toward visible Eucharistic sharing with the Orthodox.

The “special commission” has proposed three significant adjustments in the life of the council. One is to move from a parliamentary legislative style (where a majority of those voting may win a decision, even though the voters may represent substantially less than a majority of the total constituents who will be affected) to a consensus model of decision-making. The second is emphasize already existing provisions in the constitution and rules for grouped membership as associations or federations of churches and encouraging small churches in the same vicinity or of the same confession to choose this model. The third proposal makes new distinctions in the worship life of the WCC. It speaks of “common prayer” to

avoid issues of “the ecclesial character of such worship” and separates “confessional” and “inter-confessional” services. For some participants in the WCC, this last proposal has been particularly painful, and seems a step backward from earlier efforts toward worship in an ecumenical context. Others have serious concerns about the possible loss of voice for women, youth, and indigenous peoples under this model.

The program of the WCC has always sought to balance issues of faith and order, peace and justice, and mission and evangelism. The churches wrestle with questions of what is the nature of the unity for which Christ prayed in John 17. How are we, with differing histories, cultures, and theologies, to be one with each other, and to exhibit that unity in Christ, “so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23b)? What is the work of the Church in the world, particularly in ethical and justice issues, in which the joint voice of the churches, even without formal unity, can bring Christ’s healing and reconciliation to a hurting world? Finally, how is this expressed in the mission of Church?

The new reorganization into five themes shows continuity with the council’s history and captures most of the recent foci of WCC activity:

- Faith and Order
- Mission and Ecumenical Formation
- Justice, Peace, and Creation
- International Affairs, Peace and Human Security
- Diakonia and Solidarity.

While the relations with the Orthodox have drawn most of the organizational attention, the program of the WCC has had, and continues to be shaped by quite different concerns. The recent “Decade in Solidarity with Women” had major impact on basic rights in some parts of the world, notably Africa and Asia. The present “Decade to Overcome Violence” (2001–2010) is a topic that has relevance, not just for the USA’s painful discovery of our vulnerability to ideologically based terrorism, but to domestic violence, conscription of children to military service in civil rebellions, and other world issues. The WCC is also committed to a strong focus on solidarity with Africa, where the WCC’s earlier efforts to press for the end of apartheid in South Africa are widely respected as a major influence in that change.

D. Financial Situation and Organizational Changes

The financial resources of the WCC have been shrunk severely, due to: (1) the decline in European contributions, as government, tax-supported contributions to churches have been reduced; (2) the shrinkage in income from investments, familiar to the PC(USA) and to most churches in industrialized nations; and (3) the exhaustion of reserves held by the WCC. As a result, the August 2002 meeting of the Central Committee of the WCC turned to a committee of four to draw a plan for reducing the program, staff, and budget of the WCC to fit its newly projected income, while also creatively responding to newly emerging local and regional ecumenical initiatives. The report of that team has called for shrinking the organizational structure from fifteen to ten teams, transferring some activities to regional ecumenical or national councils (who are generally suffering from the same financial problems), and simplifying some activities, while eliminating others. At the time this review was conducted, only an overview of WCC actions was available. The plan calls for consolidation of programs within the WCC, a shifting of activities to regional partners, and another round of staff reductions. Using “program fund balances,” a balanced budget is projected for 2003 with a projected surplus in subsequent years. An unknown is whether the steady erosion of income from member contributions can be slowed or reversed.

The next few years will be challenging as WCC attempts to continue to adjust its mission in the face of financial realities.

The WCC 2002 annual budget was 52.5 million Swiss francs (\$34.7 million US), some 22 percent dedicated to general operations and the balance related to sixteen “program” areas covering 115 separate activities. That budget showed a projected deficit of 1,070,000 Swiss francs (\$789,376.62 US) in 2002. The program portion of the budget likewise was in a deficit position, with a deficit of 4,561,000 Swiss francs (\$3,364,810.00 US) projected in 2002. The total projected budget deficit was 5,361,000 Swiss francs (\$3.7 million US). This deficit was to be met from program fund balances.

For the five years 1998 through 2002, there was only one budget surplus. The council now finds itself in the position of having exhausted all of its reserve funds. The only source of cash to sustain the council through a turnaround period is borrowing against its real estate holdings in Geneva. A deep expense reduction program began in 1999, including reduction in staff, and it continues to date. The plan for restructuring the council was available only in very broad outline at the time of this report.

It is observed by the review committee that the World Council of Churches has served through the years as an operating agency for the relief and development programs of a number of nonchurch or quasi-church entities (e.g., Bread for the World, ACT Netherlands, Diakonisches Werk der EKD). While the direct support to those in need is a dramatic expression of the council’s mission, historically some administrative costs of operating these programs has been absorbed by the council.

In 2001, 98 percent of the council’s financial support came from Europe and North America. Of the total, European churches and agencies contributed 81 percent, North American churches and agencies contributed 17 percent, with only 2 percent of the total coming from the balance of the world. Even though the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the largest financial supporter of the council from North America, our contribution represents only a small percentage. Our denomination’s support in 2001 was 1,948,947 Swiss francs (\$1,161,944 US), some 70 percent more than the next largest North American supporter; the United Methodist Church. Only 53 percent of the WCC member churches made financial contributions in 2001.

The size of the PC(USA) contribution to the WCC comes in part because, as one of the wealthiest churches in the world, we believe that our sharing is on behalf of the Reformed family of churches as a whole. Many Reformed and Presbyterian churches in the southern hemisphere are not able to make financial contributions. In addition, more than 70 percent of PC(USA) contributions to the WCC go to support a wide range of WCC mission programs and activities, far beyond the maintenance of existing institutional structures. Just as we need to encourage other member churches to contribute what they can, it is important that we in the PC(USA) continue to maintain our own level of support.

E. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Participation

The PC(USA) had a formal delegation of eleven people at the 8th assembly of the WCC in Harare, but the total of our members at the assembly was more than three times that number. We solicited comments about the WCC from many of these people. One participant wrote, “My central image is a kaleidoscope of faces of all different colors and dress. The people I have met embody the ecumenical movement and the WCC for me. I have learned about the rich variety of churches, movements, and people who call themselves Christian and work for Christian unity. Most are committed to peace and justice. They work in difficult places—mostly with very few material resources, but with a vital faith.”

Overall, Presbyterians who have had the opportunity to experience something of the WCC value it as a forum for expanding our vision of the whole gospel, for the richness of its Christian diversity, and for the opportunity to accompany Christians from other cultures when they are at risk. Some commented on the way in which the ecumenical movement provides a cooperative and communal alternative to the competitive and often divisive dimensions of globalization.

Your review team invited the General Assembly Ecumenical Staff Team to comment on their individual work within the PC(USA) and how it was affected by the WCC, as well as what they contribute in effort to the WCC. The responses were impressive, in the appreciation of our staff for the thoughtful contacts, wider and diverse world perspectives, and enriching theological exchange they have with and through the WCC. Naturally enough, different staff members, with diverse assignments, find their links to different parts of the WCC. The staff of the Office of Theology and Worship connects most directly with Faith and Order. The office staff writes materials for the WCC and also receives helpful critiques of drafts of materials written for use by the PC(USA). The staff of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy reported similar cross-fertilization, and noted the event at Bossey (the teaching Institute of the WCC), which had been an important forum for faculty members teaching ethics at our seminaries. The area coordinators for Worldwide Ministries Division find that WCC is often a helpful point of contact in developing effective relationships with partner churches. While little of this can be immediately detected by most Presbyterians, these relationships are significant in the ways in which our denomination seeks to live out the commitments of the foundational sections of the *Book of Order*. Thus, our participation in the WCC is a way of making our particular understanding of mission and ecumenism more widely known in the world.

F. *Findings Within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

The essential finding is that our participation in the WCC fulfills a basic commitment to our understanding of the unity and mission of the church. Our theology declares that we understand ourselves to be a part of the whole worldwide body of Christ, and that seeking unity with the whole body is an obligation of our discipleship. While the WCC is an imperfect and incomplete embodiment of that calling, it continues to be the largest and most significant expression of that ecumenism, working intentionally to increase visible unity, and recognized as such by the other churches with whom the PC(USA) shares the closest ties.

It is clear that the WCC is more visible to, and more directly supportive of our national structures of mission than to most of our congregations. There is also a dilemma for the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations when it fulfills its task of naming people to delegations and other opportunities to relate to the WCC. The people who can contribute the most to the efforts of the WCC, and whose participation in the WCC will most directly nourish their work within the PC(USA) tend to be national staff. However, this limits the number of local pastors and lay leaders who are able to participate, and limits the grass-roots sense of ownership of the WCC within the PC(USA). A wider constituency in the PC(USA) has appreciated the WCC's efforts in providing resources like *Mission and Evangelism: and Ecumenical Affirmation, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the *Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women*, and the *Decade to Overcome Violence*.

G. *Findings Beyond the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

Interviews with leaders of our closest U.S. partners indicated a consistent strong affirmation, both of the central direction of the WCC's life, and of the role of the PC(USA) within the WCC. We described the ways in which our staff gains resources from the WCC. Many of our overseas partner churches are even more dependent on the WCC for the resources of a wider vision, and for support in faith in times of great challenge to the church in their national settings. Historically, the contact of the WCC with the Orthodox and other churches during the cold war, and its challenging of apartheid in South Africa stand out as dramatic examples of the WCC witness to Jesus Christ. For many member churches today, the WCC remains a lifeline to theological and pastoral support in times of difficulty, and an inspiration to their mission and evangelism.

Some of our overseas interviews pointed to a concern that the WCC is still too narrow in its ecumenism and too limited in its ability to focus on the burgeoning independent Evangelical and Pentecostal movements, which are growing in many parts of the world. There were also some criticisms

of the carefully structured, bureaucratically organized working documents, so easy for Americans and Europeans to identify with, but often limited in their ability to speak to and for Christians in other parts of the world. We again heard the need for balance among concerns for faith and order, justice and peace, and mission and evangelism. From Asia, we heard a concern that they need more focus on interfaith relations, citing the extent to which Christians in most of Asia are a small minority, always living in direct contact with other faiths. From Europe, we heard a concern that the WCC is not sensitive enough to postmodern cultures. We view these concerns as evidence that these persons do take the work of the WCC seriously, and seek to strengthen it further. We heard repeatedly from all directions the affirmation that, if the WCC were to not exist, something very like it would need to be invented.

H. *Expectations for the Future*

The WCC will continue to be an important expression of the search to make visible the understanding of unity that is embodied in the opening chapters of our Form of Government. The shift to a consensus model of decision-making will bring some frustration to the PC(USA) but this strain may be compensated for by the increase in engagement by those communions who have found the parliamentary mode so frustrating.

The WCC will continue to wrestle with concerns for mission and evangelism, the search for visible unity and the effort to speak prophetically for peace and justice. We should not see this wrestling as failure, but as a sign of deep engagement with real issues of great importance across the whole body of Christ. While the work of the special commission has eased tensions for a part of the WCC's membership, we recognized that others, particularly women, youth, and indigenous peoples could be negatively affected. The shift to consensus could easily become another vehicle for diminishing their voices and influence on decisions of the council, even as the budget constraints could easily become an excuse to reduce their numbers. The WCC will need to make a special effort to adhere to the historic commitment it has made to hear these voices.

Because the WCC is facing, along with most ecumenical work, a time of retrenchment with reduced resources, it is important that we offer some assessment of the short-range future of the WCC. We anticipate that the current situation will force the WCC to renegotiate its relationship with the European "nongovernmental organizations" that have used the WCC to administer programs. There will likely be other areas of programming that will be reduced, or perhaps eliminated, but it is not possible to speculate about those adjustments at the time of this report. The decade to overcome violence will certainly continue to be a significant focus, and the Africa Initiative will continue to be emphasized. Increasingly, participants will have to subsidize their travel costs to WCC meetings, which will reduce the attendance of some churches, while other churches may find creative ways to continue to be represented, perhaps more by their laity, and less by the heads of communions.

Dr. Konrad Raiser, the general secretary, will be retiring shortly, and the search committee for his successor is already at work. This could signal some fresh opportunities for the working style of the Geneva staff, as well as declaring solidarity with the growing part of the Christian family.

It does seem likely that the calls for an even wider participation, attracting the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical and Pentecostal communities, and some African initiated and independent churches, which defy traditional labels, will continue to get attention. It is much less apparent what kind of adaptations or new forum may make these increases of sharing a reality.