

# The World Council at 50: Seeking new terms of engagement

by [David Heim](#)

December 23, 1998

"We intend to stay together." Delegates to the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches reaffirmed that commitment in a ceremony on December 13 in Harare, Zimbabwe, repeating a declaration made at the founding of the WCC in 1948. It was something more than a mere formality. Whether the council's 340 Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches have the will to stay together was much in doubt at the start of the two-week gathering, and some observers had speculated that the Harare assembly might be the WCC's last.

Fears of imminent collapse were eased in Harare, but that was thanks as much to what didn't happen as to what did. The assembly avoided a major confrontation between the Orthodox churches and liberal Protestant churches over issues of gender, homosexuality and abortion. More positively, the assembly called for a special commission, half of whose members will be Orthodox, to come up with a new form of institutional life, one that will not leave the Orthodox feeling like the junior partners of a Protestant organization.

The only reference to homosexuality in the official sessions came on the final afternoon during a discussion of a document on human rights. Paul Sherry, president of the United Church of Christ, pointed out the absence of any reference in the statement to the rights of gays and lesbians. "Our silence in the midst of their suffering is deafening." But Sherry, clearly aware of the volatility of the issue, opted not to offer an amendment, and the topic was dropped.

Homosexuality was the focus of several *padares*, or discussion groups, that operated on the periphery of the assembly. If one were to judge from the one I attended, however, these *padares* attracted people already eager to expand the church's welcome to gays, and so didn't offer an exchange of opposing views.

It was expected that the current terms of ecumenical engagement in the WCC would be publicly challenged in Harare by Orthodox representatives. Two Orthodox churches (Bulgarian and Georgian) have already left the council, and other churches agreed before the assembly to limit their participation. The Russian Orthodox Church, the largest church in the WCC, entitled to some 20 delegates, sent only six, and none was from the church's hierarchy. The Russians announced that they would suspend their participation in the Central Committee (which governs the WCC between assemblies) until the special commission finishes its work.

At an early session, the leader of the Russian Church's delegation, Hilarion Alfeyev, bluntly stated the Orthodox complaint: "The Orthodox cannot affect the agenda of the WCC because they are a minority." Issues of vital interest to the Orthodox, such as the veneration of Mary or of icons, never make it onto the WCC agenda, Alfeyev said, because these concerns are viewed as divisive. "But what about inclusive language and the ordination of women? Are these not divisive?"

Some observers noted privately that the blunt remarks from the youthful Russian delegates reflected a lack of experience in ecumenical affairs. They also reflected their need to fend off the anti-ecumenical pressures back home. Economic disarray in Russia has fueled a disillusionment with the West and led to a rise in nationalist feeling, and this in turn has spawned a fundamentalist movement within the Russian Orthodox Church. Church officials who support ecumenical contacts with the West are an obvious target for ultraconservatives. Andrei Zolotov, religion correspondent for the *Moscow Times*, noted that Alfeyev and his colleagues are seen as archconservatives in the West, but are regarded as liberal heretics in parts of their own church.

Alfeyev overstated his case. Some parts of the WCC are in fact quite happy to talk about icons, Mary, and the range of doctrinal and liturgical topics of concern to the Orthodox. Studies of this sort are regularly carried out by the Faith and Order Commission. Nevertheless, such efforts are not widely publicized in either Orthodox or Protestant churches. And as Leonid Kishkovsky of the Orthodox Church in America pointed out, these themes are rarely emphasized in the "most visible aspects of the WCC—the work of the assembly and the Central Committee."

Alfeyev's comments on minority status identified an underlying problem of the WCC structure. Konrad Raiser, WCC general secretary, acknowledged that Western Protestants have dominated both the agenda and the ethos of the WCC. Though by

an informal agreement the Orthodox are assured 25 percent of the seats on the Central Committee, this amounts to an assurance of permanent minority status. Said Raiser: "There is a tendency for the Protestant majority to listen politely to the Orthodox view and say, 'OK, that's the Orthodox view, but we have different views and we will do what we think we should do.'"

It's time, Raiser suggested, for the WCC to abandon reliance on majority rule and develop "new forms of representation, participation and decision making." Reliance on winner-take-all parliamentary procedures "is not necessarily the best way to express an understanding of a 'fellowship of churches.'"

It is not only the Orthodox who are searching for a new style of ecumenical relationship, according to Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America. So too are "women, evangelicals, young churches in the South and old churches in the North." Granberg-Michaelson, who used to work at WCC headquarters in Geneva, said, "The Western liberal Protestant ethos has to be inwardly transformed. This view is shared by many churches. It's taken the Orthodox to raise this concern."

Paul A. Crow Jr., veteran ecumenical officer of the Disciples of Christ, agreed that Protestants also feel trapped by an organizational culture in which "we don't talk about issues, we vote about them. The winner-take-all climate has begun to erode fellowship."

A council that works by consensus rather than majority vote is likely to be slower to act or to issue public pronouncements. While this prospect worries some, Granberg-Michaelson said he thought it might not be a bad result: "Such a council would no longer be the vehicle for acts of social action that the member churches themselves don't have the courage to undertake." In the long run, a council that was slower to act might have a deeper witness and a greater credibility.

the orthodox want their presence to be recognized qualitatively, not just quantitatively. For example, they like the model of relationships used by the Middle East Council of Churches (and some other national and regional councils), in which major church traditions-Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant-operate as equal partners regardless of the number of churches in each grouping.

But it's hard to see how this approach could be transferred to the WCC, where the wider variety of Protestant groups cannot be separated into just a few ecclesial or

confessional families, much less one group called "Protestants." Paul Crow pointed out another problem: organizing the council on the basis of church families would diminish the voice of the small and independent churches from the southern and eastern regions.

At this point, no WCC leaders were prepared to offer any details on how a new mode of ecumenical fellowship might be forged. It will probably take several years for a proposal to emerge from the special commission and then from the Central Committee.

While seeking to address the rifts in its own fellowship, the assembly decided to try to expand the WCC's connections to the many churches and ecumenical groups that are outside the council. It endorsed the idea of establishing a "forum" that would include evangelical, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic agencies along with the WCC. The hope is that these groups could meet with a minimum of structure and on neutral ground, not as part of a WCC program. (The desired partners would in any case probably not participate in a project sponsored by the WCC.)

Some delegates doubted whether the WCC should try to widen its fellowship at the same time it faces severe internal tensions. European churches, which finance the bulk of the council's work, were especially worried that such a forum would end up creating a new set of programs and a parallel structure that would divert energy from the WCC itself. "Our main task is to strengthen the internal life of the WCC," said Lutheran Bishop Voitto Huotari of Finland.

But Clifton Kirkpatrick, stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), argued that the council could not afford to turn inward. "The WCC is not the ecumenical movement. It is the servant of the ecumenical movement." The forum proposal passed by a more than 2-1 margin.

Can the WCC move in two directions at once, establishing more trust between Protestants and Orthodox within the council while creating new relationships with evangelicals and Pentecostals and Roman Catholics outside the council? It has little choice but to try. If the Orthodox walk away, the WCC becomes simply a Protestant group, one that doesn't even encompass most of the world's Protestants. And even with the Orthodox included, the WCC includes less than one-quarter of the world's Christians.

The WCC's awareness of this situation helps explain why its 50th anniversary assembly was a muted gathering. As it celebrated its history and remembered the previous assemblies-at Amsterdam, Evanston, New Delhi, Uppsala, Nairobi, Vancouver and Canberra-the WCC talked much of "self-examination" and "repentance."

One further sign of the mood at Harare was the decision not to sponsor joint services of the Lord's Supper. The Vancouver and Canberra meetings featured assembly-sponsored eucharistic services, one for the Orthodox, one for the non-Orthodox. Such services had produced considerable pain and frustration when participants realized that the Orthodox would not share communion with the non-Orthodox and that the non-Orthodox were not invited to share in the Orthodox communion.

Instead of repeating that experience, the WCC arranged for participants to be invited to five different churches in Harare (Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox) where they could celebrate the Eucharist according to their own tradition.

This idea reportedly provoked heated debate in the worship planning committee and the Central Committee, which at first rejected it. For some, the attempt at a common eucharistic service was a prophetic sign of the unity that the ecumenical movement seeks. Other voices, led by the Orthodox, contended that until such unity is attained, using the sacrament of unity this way is misleading and inappropriate. In the end, assembly planners agreed that, at this fragile moment in the life of the WCC, a realistic acknowledgment of division is also a form of ecumenical witness.