

Which global church? The Pentecostal World Fellowship and the WCC

by [Wesley Granberg-Michaelson](#) in the [February 5, 2014](#) issue



GLOBAL CONTACTS: Prince Guneratnam, chair of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, addressed the Tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, South Korea, in November 2013. © PETER WILLIAMS / WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

The new Calvary Convention Center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, was filled nearly to capacity as 3,710 Pentecostals gathered from 73 countries around the world. They came to this mostly Muslim country for the 23rd Pentecostal World Conference, a global gathering which takes place every three years. The host was Calvary Church, a Pentecostal megachurch in Kuala Lumpur whose lead pastor, Prince Guneratnam, is currently chair of the Pentecostal World Fellowship.

Many participants at the August meeting were young and reflected the enthusiasm of the fastest-growing segment of the Christian world. In 1970 Pentecostals accounted for only 5 percent of all Christians, but today Pentecostals and charismatics—including those in other denominations who exercise Pentecostal or charismatic gifts—constitute 25 percent of all the world's Christians. In Asia, 80 percent of all Christian conversions are to Pentecostal forms of Christianity. Or think of it this way: one out of 12 people alive today is Pentecostal.

I attended the Kuala Lumpur meeting as part of a delegation from the Global Christian Forum, an ecumenical initiative drawing together all the major families of world Christianity and supported by the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Pentecostal World Fellowship, among others. Before leaving for Malaysia, I spoke with an outstanding journalist who covers religion for a leading U.S. newspaper. She had not heard anything about the Pentecostal World Conference.

I wasn't surprised. The Pentecostal world lives mostly within its own bubble, and those outside it—both those in other Christian communities and those in the media—remain largely insulated from a deeper knowledge and understanding of its dynamics.

The *Atlas of Global Christianity* estimates that Pentecostal and similar renewalist movements are growing at almost five times the rate of overall global Christianity. In doing research for a recent book on global Christianity, I found some staggering statistics. For instance, it's estimated that throughout Asia there are 873,000 Chinese charismatic congregations. In Latin America, Pentecostals are growing at three times the rate of the Catholic Church. And 44 percent of the world's Pentecostals are found in sub-Saharan Africa.

Attending the Pentecostal World Conference, I sensed a movement that was young, vibrant and confident. Its relative isolation from the wider Christian community, however, tends to reinforce a parochial, narrow and even defensive posture. And the non-Pentecostal world is unable to appreciate its gifts, spiritual vitality and changing patterns of ministry and outreach.

Two months after Pentecostals boarded planes to leave Kuala Lumpur, about the same number Christians from every part of the globe were arriving in Busan, Korea, for the Tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches. For them the WCC represents for the most part a very different stream of world Christianity.

The WCC is composed of 345 member churches in 110 countries. Primarily these churches are part of the historic Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican traditions. Altogether, their combined membership totals more than 500 million people—a figure actually somewhat less than the estimated 600 million Pentecostals and charismatics in the world.

Of the WCC's 345 member churches, only seven are Pentecostal, and these are small denominations, mostly from Latin America, whose combined membership is only 281,600. The dominant ethos, culture and programmatic activity of the WCC are shaped by the concerns of the historic Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches.

Assemblies of the WCC are held once every seven years, gathering delegates and other participants from its member churches as well as other observers. In addition to acting as the WCC's governing body, the assembly held plenary sessions devoted to themes of the WCC's work, daily worship, Bible studies, a wide range of workshops and an exhibition space for ecumenical groups from around the world. The Busan assembly was the fourth WCC assembly I've had the privilege of attending, first as a WCC staff member, then as a member of its Central Committee, and most recently as the ecumenical adviser to the delegation from my church, the Reformed Church in America.

Reflecting on these two global gatherings provides a window into these different streams of world Christianity and the distance between them, as well as on surprising points of potential contact.

In Kuala Lumpur, high-octane contemporary worship with smoke, flashing lights and huge screens energized and empowered worshipers. The theme of the gathering was "In One Accord—Rallying, Reaching, and Releasing the Next Generation." Several of the world's best-known Pentecostal preachers delivered stirring messages, followed by altar calls for those seeking the fresh empowerment of God's Spirit.

Some of the leaders of the church in the Global South are little known in the United States—such as Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Founded in Nigeria in 1952, it has 5 million members in 147 countries, including several congregations in north Texas, where it recently dedicated a pavilion center costing \$15.5 million.

The Kuala Lumpur meeting was more like a global revival service than a conference. With very little infrastructure, the Pentecostal World Fellowship's business was done behind the scenes by its executive committee.

By contrast, delegates to the WCC assembly spent considerable time acting on lengthy reports in business sessions, as befits the governing body of a complex

organization with a budget of over \$30 million. The assembly theme was “God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace,” which provided a framework for worship and Bible study. Of the four assemblies I’ve attended, this assembly’s theme seemed the weakest, for it emphasized commitments already enshrined in the WCC, and it didn’t open space for creative theological reflection that could expand and inspire the WCC’s vision.

The greatest difference between these two gatherings is in worship. I’ve often found worship in WCC gatherings to be inspiring, for they have gathered sounds and styles of the world church into creative expressions of confession and praise. But more recently the WCC’s worship life has been negotiated into highly scripted forms guaranteed not to offend various sensibilities. In part, that’s the result of listening more deeply to the WCC’s Orthodox members, who have insisted that these practices should not even be called worship but rather “common prayer.”

The WCC book containing the liturgies and songs for morning prayer each day was in five languages and was 244 pages long. Themes for each day, like “water, fire and wind” and “food and soil,” tried to integrate the worship with the Bible studies and connect to the assembly’s main emphasis on justice and peace. All activities were tightly choreographed and televised. The work the planners put into this was enormous.

But the result, at least in my experience, was an experience of worship tightly controlled in form and dominated by the pragmatic goal of making some important point relative to the assembly’s agenda.

In Kuala Lumpur, by contrast, not a sheet of paper was used in worship. The dominant focus was on enlivening the inward spiritual experience and commitment of each participant. Opening space for the free movement of God’s Holy Spirit was the constant goal. These services had their own “liturgy”—a sequence of praise, ecstatic prayer, passionate preaching and an altar call for personal empowerment. Eventually, this became predictable in its own way.

Every one of the preachers at the Pentecostal World Conference was a man. In light of Pentecostalism’s history of affirming women preachers, this fact seemed curious, at the very least. To any ecumenical observer, it was incomprehensible.

Despite the lack of any significant participation by Pentecostals and evangelicals in the life of the WCC and the marginal presence of Catholics (who are officially

observers), the WCC displays an incredible diversity, and its gatherings are an incredible feat and a rare gift. My Bible study group in Busan, for instance, included two women pastors from Africa, a woman from the Coptic Church in Egypt (who was comoderator of the group with me), a Baptist pastor from England and another from Hong Kong, and two women from Indonesia. Our conversations were unforgettably rich. The Spirit moves in fresh ways when there is such a diversity in Christian tradition and in geography, age and gender.

If Pentecostals might press the WCC on how they make room for the power of God's Holy Spirit in their worship and life, those in the WCC movement might ask Pentecostals how they obey God's expectations for justice. Both questions are fair.

I came to Kuala Lumpur especially attentive to what the world's Pentecostal leadership might say about the biblical themes of justice and mercy. Often what I heard surprised and encouraged me. For instance, Billy Wilson, the new president of Oral Roberts University, urged listeners to get beyond the first four verses of Acts 2, pointing out that the whole chapter shows the church meeting concrete social needs. The work of equipping a younger generation, he stressed, must recognize that they have been "graced" with a passion for justice on earth.

Glen Burris Jr., the president of the Foursquare Church, which has 7,000 licensed pastors, gave a powerful message focusing on God's mercy, based on Isaiah 58 and Micah 6:8. His plea was to "mobilize the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world." Concluding his message, he asked the music group to return to sing "Hosanna," by Hillsong United, centering on the phrase, "Break my heart for what breaks Yours," reflecting on the world's pain and injustice.

The Pentecostal World Conference also had workshops, and I went to one on "Pentecostalism, Social Engagement, and Justice," led by Ivan Satyavrata, who heads an impressive Assemblies of God ministry in Kolkata (Calcutta), India. His presentation was titled "Power to the Poor: The Pentecostal Tradition of Social Engagement," and he argued persuasively how empowerment of the marginalized in society has been a key feature of Pentecostal ministry in many parts of the world and a reason for its growth. His perspectives echoed the finding of scholars Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori (authors of *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*).

The Pentecostal and ecumenical worlds need one another in the journey toward Christian unity, for the sake of God's mission in the world. It's possible to envision avenues of dialogue and fruitful points of interaction. But for the most part, these two Christian environments have been hermetically sealed off from one another. It's as if we're in a state of ecclesiological apartheid. There are barely 50 people in the world who attended both the Pentecostal World Conference and the WCC assembly.

Some quiet initiatives and gestures of ecumenical hope have been taken place. At the WCC's Harare assembly in 1998, a Joint Consultative Group between Pentecostals and the WCC was established, and the group has worked well. Over the past five years, the group focused its reflections on the nature of the church, and it presented its report to the Busan assembly. Through initiatives established at the 2007 world gathering of the Global Christian Forum, held in Limuru, Kenya, the Pentecostal World Fellowship extended an invitation for WCC General Secretary Olav Tveit to bring greetings to the 22nd Pentecostal World Conference when it met in Stockholm in 2010. And Prince Guneratnam brought greetings to the WCC assembly in Busan. Both of these were historically unprecedented events.

Most promising has been the strong and active engagement of the Pentecostal World Fellowship in the Global Christian Forum, in which Pentecostals have interacted with historic Protestant, Orthodox, evangelical and Catholic partners. Tentative plans call for the next world gathering of the Global Christian Forum to take place in Brazil in 2016, directly prior to the 24th Pentecostal World Conference in São Paulo.

Yet a century of isolation, with a history of rejection and mutual recrimination, has left enduring suspicions and deep wounds between Pentecostal and ecumenical communities. As Pentecostalism matures into a major stream shaping the future of world Christianity, and the ecumenical movement looks to its new horizons, the time seems right to foster a broad and serious engagement between these separated parts of the global body of Christ.

Returning from Busan, I imagined what could have happened if the theme at Kuala Lumpur had been "God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace." And what if the WCC assembly had used the theme "In One Accord: Rallying, Reaching, and Releasing the Next Generation." Both would have found themselves stretched in unfamiliar directions. Each could have been challenged more fully to engage the whole gospel for the whole world. Such are the new frontiers before us in the enduring call to Christian unity.