

Finding a Voice, by Marlin VanElderén

reviewed by [Paul Crow](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

Until his untimely death two years ago, Marlin VanElderén was the executive editor of the publications of the World Council of Churches. During his 18-year tenure in Geneva he was a lively interpretative link between the WCC and its member churches, informing the churches of both the WCC's achievements and its beleaguered moments.

Among his myriad assignments VanElderén first served as the editor of *One World*, the acclaimed magazine for pastors, laypeople and WCC insiders who wanted an authentic perspective on the activities, struggles and decisions of this "privileged instrument" of the ecumenical movement. *Finding a Voice* brings together 82 of VanElderén's insightful, theologically penetrating and often lyrical editorials from that magazine. These, his monthly teaching moments, challenge us to deepen our ecumenical commitments.

A few samples: "Freezing Out God" argues the immorality of Ronald Reagan's refusal to approve a nuclear freeze; "The Complexity of Unity" stresses that most steps toward visible unity are difficult, painful and require us to change; "Root Causes" makes clear that alleviating suffering requires the powerful decision-makers to invite hungry, oppressed and voiceless people to participate in the decisive discussions; and "A Certain Poisoned Sweetness" helps us to differentiate between confrontations which tear down and those that build up Christian communion.

VanElderén's judgments were not always gracefully received, but such is the plight of those who try to bring the churches and their ecumenical institutions to greater accountability and faithfulness. In one way or another each of his editorials wrestles with the calling to an authentic Christian ecumenism. Collected, they become a handbook on the spirituality of ecumenism, a spirituality that lives in the dialogue between the church and the world.

After *One World* ceased to exist, VanEldern became editor of the *Ecumenical Review*, the WCC's seminal theological journal. He worked tirelessly with his Geneva colleagues to publish the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (1991), whose second edition soon will appear. VanElderen also was the primary drafter of *A Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches* (1998), the critical document that gave the council a new orientation and organizational structure.

In the book's introduction John Bluck, former WCC director of communications and the first editor of *One World*, who convinced VanElderen to leave his position as senior editor at Eerdmans and venture to Geneva, sums up VanElderen's importance: "Few of us could match Marlin's ability to discern and read those signs that give direction to the ecumenical movement. And few could match his confidence that the movement would continue to surprise and delight us on our journey."