

**"Celebrating the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the World Council of Churches"**

**Contributions from NZ church representatives most closely involved.  
Organised by EcuAction, Canterbury**

**From John Bluck**



or



A long time WCC staffer sat in an airport lounge in India and said in reply to a colleague who asked him what it was like to give your life to the World Council, " It feels like being sent into space and not ever helped to find a of way of landing back on earth."

30 years from returning to New Zealand after ten years on the Council staff, I still feel as though I haven't landed properly, let alone succeeded in anchoring that ecumenical experience back home.

For a while it was easier. The Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand flourished like a beautiful flowering plant then died. My own Anglican Church, having killed off the Plan for Union, made some brave noises about ecumenical action and mutual recognition of ministries. But those sounds spluttered and faded and the long winter of ecumenical retreat followed. And when the sun breaks out as it occasionally does, the news goes unreported, like the recent visit of Pope Francis to the World Council headquarters was ignored by our media.

Despite all that, there are still signs of real collaboration at local church level. The interfaith movement shows the most exciting promise, as does a stirring of eco theology.

But the international ambitions and energy of the World Council don't inspire church leaders as they once did.

The desirability of a movement that embraces all Christians and finds common ground with all people of faith is more urgent than ever. But the trigger to reignite that movement in Aotearoa remains elusive. The old dream is yet to find a landing pad again.

Bishop John Bluck (Anglican)

**From Elizabeth Mackie OP**



I visited the World Council of churches only once. I was struck, as all must surely be, by the chapel in the ecumenical centre, with its simplicity, openness and symbolism. The streams of water depicted in the mosaic floor had a striking resemblance to the braided rivers of Te Waipounamu, land of my birth. The streams are distinct and separate, from time to time, floods link the disparate strands into larger connected masses of water. This is a powerful image of the ecumenical movement: distinct Christian traditions, moving separately on their distinct paths, all formed through the waters of baptism, all moving towards the same ocean of God's love.

The World Council of Churches has carried this vision faithfully for 70 years. It calls all of us to respect one another and our individual denominational traditions, to reverence one another and the paths on which we walk side by side, and to deepen our relationships so that we can speak and act as one in our very divided world. Respect, reverence, relationship are for me the 3Rs of ecumenism.

I have been privileged as a Roman Catholic to enter deeply into ecumenical life through Christian World Service and through the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand. The former took me into the work of churches round the world as they strive to bring peace and justice to some of the poorest and most disadvantaged communities on earth. The latter came onto the New Zealand scene as an extraordinarily creative gift of the Spirit, challenging us to greater inclusion, a search for consensus, a thirst for justice, especially to the indigenous people of this land, a yearning for greater unity.

The Conference did not survive but the spirit lives on in this land through women and men who continue to work together as Christians for the good of all peoples and the care for all creation. Pope Francis suggests that "unity is achieved by journeying. When we pray together and collaborate together in proclaiming the Gospel and in the service of others, we are already united."

Sister Elizabeth Mackie OP (Catholic)

## From Ray Coster



One of the real joys and privileges of my entire ministry of over forty years has been my involvement in the ecumenical family through the World Council of Churches. If I could give any advice to a younger Christian today it would be to become involved in this wonderful movement much sooner than I did.

I have just returned from representing the New Zealand member churches at the Central Committee meeting in Geneva. As this is our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary it was a very special and memorable celebration. There were a number of highlights such as the visit of Pope Francis. I appreciated the Holy Father's final words to us, *"Dear brothers and sisters, I have desired to come here, a pilgrim in quest of unity and peace. I thank God because here I have found you, brothers and sisters already making this same journey."* Another highlight was the attendance of four members from North Korean Churches.

People often ask me why I consider the WCC to be important and what impact the WCC makes. Three words sum up this ministry for me: Unity, Justice and Peace.

Seventy years ago on 23 August 1948 the WCC was created in Amsterdam as a visible sign of Jesus' prayer, 'Father, may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me. John 17:21 (NRSV). There is beauty in unity. To meet in Central Committee, or at a WCC Assembly, is to sit with people from almost every country and denomination in the world and feel 'at home'. There one learns and grows and experiences the full depth and breadth of God's love as expressed through the Christian Church.

At WCC we are often reminded that as beautiful as unity is, it is not an end in itself. Ecumenism and mission are closely intertwined. The Church was given not only Good News to tell, it was given the best news to share. We do that best when we are united.

While the WCC is not an aid or development organisation its work and influence is wide and vast, impacting nations and peoples. It is so encouraging to look back over 70 years and reflect on the profound influence of the ecumenical family around the world in matters of justice and peace. We could talk about the Program to Combat Racism or the significant part played by the ecumenical family in the move toward peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula today. Every week the WCC is speaking for the voiceless, seeking justice for vulnerable and marginalised, and advocating for peace in every troubled spot on earth. It accompanies the indigenous people of the world in their quest for justice. It walks with people living with disability. The WCC is walking a pilgrimage of justice and peace for all. In doing this it is simply reflecting the heart of God (Isaiah 1: 17)

In New Zealand we may sometimes feel that we are but a few small islands with only five million people. We may underestimate our significance on the world stage. Many churches around the world are very grateful to the New Zealand churches accompanying them on their journey. This

two-way blessing of church to church is something that we can rejoice in during our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the World Council of Churches.

Rev Ray Coster (Presbyterian)

**From Tara Tautari**



I've always believed that to be Methodist in Aotearoa is to be ecumenical. Belonging to Taha Maori within the Methodist church and growing up as a rangatahi, we were encouraged to envisage and work towards an 'oikumene' that was inclusive, diverse, interconnected and faith filled. Our own Methodist bicultural journey set a standard for how we chose to be sisters and brothers in Christ in this land, and despite the many challenges along the way, we were committed to growing together, not only as Methodists, but also through our membership with other ecumenical bodies.

With this understanding I first travelled to Geneva, Switzerland, to take up my work with the World Council of Churches (WCC) initially as an intern in 1995 with the Programme to Combat Racism (Indigenous Peoples Desk), and then later on in 2001 as the newly appointed Programme Executive with the Education and Ecumenical Formation team.

What was so special about my time with the WCC, is that it gave me the opportunity to work alongside member churches around the world who like us at home, sought to live out an ecumenism that was contextual, relevant, and that had at its heart a profound desire for transformational encounter. One of the greatest strengths of the WCC has been its ability to provide the ecumenical space where such transformational encounters can occur. From its very first assembly in 1948, when it said of its membership 'we intend to stay together'- the WCC has continued to build a fellowship of churches who stand shoulder to shoulder in critical solidarity, while calling each other to visible unity. On a personal level I have been moved to witness the reconciliation and healing that can occur when churches together can speak truth to power and set themselves on a journey towards justice and peace. I consider it the greatest privilege to have been able to serve with the WCC and in some small way contribute to its legacy of worldwide ecumenical engagement.

Tara Tautari (Methodist)

## From Angus McLeod



As I reflect on the World Council of Churches two significant experiences come to my mind.

The first goes back to a war-time experience. I was invited to attend a Presbyterian-Methodist Young Men's Easter Camp at Waikanai near Wellington in 1942. I was only 16 then. One of the speakers was Rev. Bob Thornley. He was described in the camp programme as "just back from the Famous Amsterdam World Conference". Bob Thornley, in private chats and in public speeches shared his experience of the founding of the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.). I caught the ecumenical vision at that time and have been a loyal supporter of W.C.C. ever since.

My second experience did not happen until over 30 years had passed. During that time, I had attended numerous W.C.C. meetings, met W.C.C. leaders and guided staff members around the country. But it was not until 1975 that I received an invitation to attend a World Assembly. So, along with other delegates I travelled to Nairobi, Kenya for the 5<sup>th</sup> Assembly. It lasted for two and a half weeks. I attended inspiring rallies, bible studies, group discussions and as a secretary of a committee. After the Assembly I reported back to the New Zealand Churches: "I give this report with a deep gratitude to God for a rich experience of Christian fellowship and for the opportunity to learn afresh that Jesus Christ frees and unites."

I have attended other notable W.C.C. meetings, but the Nairobi, Kenya stands out in my memory despite the fact that it happened in a very different era over 40 years ago. Since then while I have never had such an experience as that in Kenya, I have been able to keep in touch with the fresh challenges and thinking that the W.C.C. has brought to the new world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Rev Angus MacLeod (Baptist)