

Special Reports

The 1991 WCC Assembly Recollected

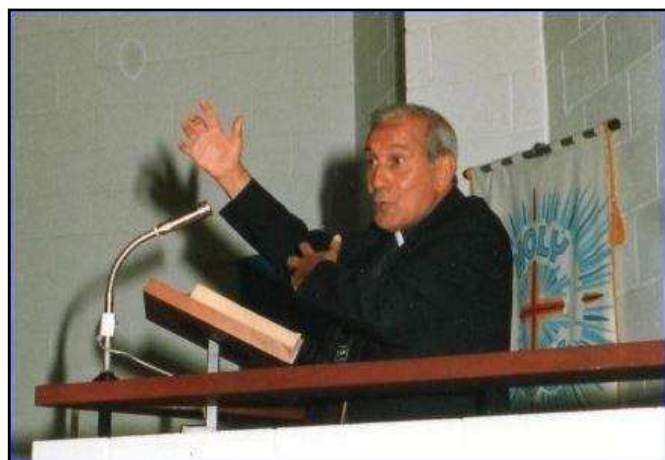


Thirty years after the event, we are being reminded of the seventh World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly which was held in Canberra from 7 to 20 February 1991. At that time the WCC wanted to express its solidarity with Christians and Churches under the Southern Cross. Over 4000 people attended from around the world. There were around 950 official delegates of member churches of the WCC, an equal number of representatives of other churches and organisations, as well as advisers, guests, observers, staff, stewards, visitors, members of the press and many volunteers.



Robyn Swadling (left) and Robin Bennett of St Margaret's Uniting Church, Hackett queuing in the Tent of Worship at the ANU to have repentance ashes placed on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday 1991. Photo by Brian Rope.

Assembly venues included the then new National Convention Centre Canberra (opened in 1989) and an enormous, temporary marquee seating 2000 for daily worship on Fellows Oval at the Australian National University. It was known as the "Tent of Worship". An event called the "Gathering under the Southern Cross" took place in Commonwealth Park on Sunday 10 February. A special stage was erected for it on the trays of two large trucks, as using Stage 88 was regarded as unsuitable for reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



WCC General Secretary (1985-1992) Rev. Dr Emilio Castro, Methodist minister from Uruguay, preaching at St Margaret's Uniting Church, Hackett in 1989, on an advance visit to Canberra. Castro has been described by Methodist Bishop Rosemarie Wenner as "one of the role models not only for Christians in Latin America but for Methodists all over the world". Photo by Brian Rope.

Copies of *Contact* from 1989 to 1991 tell some of the story of the Assembly. The chairperson of the Churches National Co-ordinating Committee for the Seventh Assembly was named as layperson **John Denton**, General Secretary of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia. A statement headed "Towards Canberra 1991" by **Rev. Dr Emilio Castro**, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva was included in 1990. City Church members were encouraged to become involved and many did in such roles as volunteers or choristers.

The Assembly was a significant event for Canberra City Uniting Church. We were the closest church to many of the events, only three years after the opening of our new church building in 1988. The Bennett Room, then on the first floor of Pilgrim



Members of the choir in rehearsal at City Church on 2 December 1990 for the Gathering Under the Southern Cross included Canberra City Congregation members: front right: Ben Bairstow; back left: Milton Chapple; back right: Lomond Miller, Shirley Chalmers, Ruth Grace, Beryl Woolley, Dorothy Hine; second back row: Enid Chapple, Judith Hatfield, Sandra Child; third back row: Jill Semenez, Robin Chapple, Dorothy Bairstow; walking past at rear: Robert Tupper. Photo by Brian Rope.

House, and later also the shop front now occupied by the Early Morning Centre, were used as the Assembly's Canberra offices. The first of these were opened by **John Langmore MP** on 11 February 1990. General Secretary of the then Australian Council of Churches, **Jean Skuse**, relocated to Canberra from Sydney to run the office, along with **Ranjini Rebera**, chair of City Church's Council of Elders. During the Assembly there was worship at City Church on Sunday, 17 February 2021, with an estimated 400 attending. The church was also used as the rehearsal space for the Assembly's massed choir. Three of the local co-ordinators came from City Church: **Terry Birtles** as University of Canberra Accommodation Co-ordinator; **Rev. John Dunn** (then City Church's Administrative and Development Officer) as Stationery and Supplies Co-ordinator; and **Ranjini Rebera** as Co-ordinator of the Co-ordinators.

Interestingly, City Church had acquired a new minister at the beginning of 1991, **Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood**. He and his wife **Janet Wood** had just moved from Adelaide. At that time D'Arcy was President Elect of the Uniting Church in Australia and was a delegate to the Assembly in that capacity. Janet coordinated many of the volunteers at the Assembly. **Bob Griffiths** was an accredited visitor to the Assembly, formally on behalf of City Church. Others of us undertook various roles. For example, the then named Tongan Congregation and **Justine Gibbings** organised a large lunch for Assembly delegates in the Riley Hall and elsewhere after worship on Sunday 17 February. On weekdays **Dorothy Hine** coordinated sandwich lunches for Assembly delegates and others supplied by Blue Gums Café in Pilgrim House.

Michael Bongiorno (younger son of Justine Gibbings and Aldo Bongiorno), then aged five years, in front of some of the embroidered patches at the WCC Assembly in 1991. Photo provided by Justine Gibbings.



The 1991 WCC Assembly was remembered in Canberra during the opening worship service for the 2021 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This has prompted some of us to write about our involvement in the Assembly 30 years later.

Recollections by Brian Rope

Chairperson of Local Arrangements Committee. (Worshipper at Canberra City Uniting Church from 1994 to 2005).

I remember a March-April 1989 visit by the WCC Advance Planning party. Thankfully the National Convention Centre was complete in time to be the main Assembly venue in February 1991. WCC General Secretary, Emilio Castro, preached and lunched at St Margaret's during that advance visit.

I chaired the Local Arrangements Committee for the Assembly and worked on the Uniting Church press team during it. I travelled to quite a few planning meetings in Sydney with Anglican **Bishop Owen Dowling**. I had many conversations with **Ranjini Rebera** and **Gillian Hunt** in the Assembly office. I felt somewhat unnecessary during the Assembly, as my role had essentially been completed beforehand. But I helped show overseas visitors around at Parliament House and attended worship in the marquee on Fellows Oval – photographing several altar boys carrying burning incense, and hearing the choir sing many great songs from *In Spirit and in Truth*.

Recollections by Ranjini Rebera

Organiser, Canberra Office of WCC Assembly.

City Church – an Assembly Organising Hub

Canberra City Uniting Church became the hub for organising the Assembly when I agreed to be the Organiser of the Canberra Office. In 1990 Jean Skuse, National Coordinator, and I set up the Assembly office in the Bennett Room, then on the 1st floor. When the tenant moved out of its rented space on the ground floor, our office moved in. Today this space is City's Early Morning Centre. City Church Council obligingly permitted us to use the Johnson Auditorium for storing the 100s of 'patches' from across the country, the worship space for choristers to practice in, the Binns and Gifford Rooms and the Riley Hall for meetings and ecumenical gatherings.

Among memories that come to mind: locating a tent for the Worship Space to seat over 2000 persons, finally found in New Zealand! Negotiations with ACT Government to paint Kangaroo and Koala paws along the streets to guide delegates and visitors to the National Convention Centre. The Salvation Army volunteers meeting delegates and visitors and filling a fleet of buses to take people to their designated residences in Canberra, so causing amazement along the Hume Highway.

A significant memory for me is the opening of the Assembly. Professor Chung Kyung-Hyung from Korea was the keynote Speaker. She arrived with a troupe of Korean dancers and musicians, later joined by Aboriginal dancers. The Gulf War, also titled 'Dessert Storm' was engulfing the Middle East. She had rewritten her entire presentation on the flight. Her presentation was challenging and sometimes confrontational as it set the tone for the Assembly.

In 1992 I finally closed the Assembly Office. It was an experience and a privilege that has contributed a great deal to my own ecumenical journey.

Recollections by Terry Birtles

University of Canberra accommodation coordinator.

My role with the organising committee of the Assembly was to coordinate accommodation arrangements for Assembly guests at the University of Canberra (UC) residences. I was assisted by teams of volunteers from Canberra congregations.

Assembly guests arrived overnight at Sydney international airport and were transported direct from their Customs clearance to Canberra, where the first stops were at Australian National University

(ANU) residences. Buses then terminated at UC where unallocated guests were welcomed, given supper and allotted a bedroom. The only hiccup occurred when a South African bishop on Bishop Tutu's staff failed to alight for a reserved bedroom at ANU and arrived at UC at 2.00a.m. where he was allocated a spare bedroom. ANU staff alerted Australian security that he was missing. By 7.00 a.m., a full-scale national alarm had been raised with Australian police, amidst fears of kidnapping by terrorists hostile to the Assembly or Bishop Tutu. I checked the UC welcome desks and found him listed. Once discovered, we found him quietly eating his breakfast with other guests.

I had other reasons for sleepless nights. Bedroom doors could be inadvertently locked when the occupant visited a bathroom with no room key. Almost every night, I would receive an urgent telephone appeal for assistance from a bath-robed bishop locked out of his bedroom. I would drive from Giralang with master keys to rescue him until I also became a UC resident.

Breakfasts also provided some amusement, once the Assembly guests established a barter system to swap condiments between kitchens. Once general consensus established that Vegemite was least preferred and that US visitors would pay 4 Vegemite sachets for one Peanut Butter sachet or 2 Vegemites for one Strawberry Jam, the currency was established.

Recollections by Bob Griffiths

Accredited Assembly visitor.

It was a great honour for me to attend the World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly in February 1991 as Canberra City Uniting Church's official visitor. I was grateful for the opportunity to not only listen to the main sessions at the Assembly, but also attend Bible studies, seminars and performances by artists.

The very first video I ever bought was one which showed highlights from the Assembly. I still have a book with six Bible studies based on the Assembly's theme *Come Holy Spirit. Renew the Whole Creation*.

My recollection is that some contentious issues arose at the Assembly, some of which churches are still grappling with today. For example, the 1991 Gulf War started three weeks before the Assembly began. There were discussions about the statement on the war which revealed major differences within the WCC over questions about the justifiability of war.

Another event which drew much discussion was a presentation by Professor Chung Kyung-Hyung, a Korean Presbyterian. Her creative presentation included dancers and Aboriginal performers, receiving a standing ovation but also criticism by attendees with traditional theological views about the extent to which Christianity can accommodate practices from other religions.

However, the most memorable moment of the Assembly that I can recall was not one of disagreement, but of unity. I recall the heads of the North Korean and South Korean delegations joining hands and raising their arms in the air. To me, it seemed to symbolise what the World Council of Churches should be all about, with Christian love transcending political divisions.

Recollections by Janet Wood

Co-ordinator of volunteers and wife of Canberra City Uniting Church minister (1991-1996), Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood.

Not just going the second mile: volunteers at the Assembly.

Before I left Adelaide someone suggested I had to leave because I had run out of people to coax into volunteering at the 1991 World Council of Churches Assembly in my new home-town of Canberra. My job was to have on hand people who could and would turn their hands to anything.

The many 'anythings' over those fourteen days included finding people with the strength to heave stones for a sculptor. There were unexpected arrivals at the airport who needed transport or accommodation. Some needed to contact their particular embassies. Others had lost their passports. A volunteer skilled in needle and thread baulked at the task of creating a canopy which would be used to float over a ceremonial carrying of a Bible. As a person from a denomination used to somewhat plain Protestantism, she feared that ecumenical co-operation could go too far! However, she made it and it was very beautiful. Another very reliable seamstress sadly tripped and broke her arm at Ursula College at the ANU, the temporary centre for making banners, robes etc.

On any day there would be about 300 volunteers ready to be dispersed across the many venues. My own plans to participate in worship, panels and sit at the feet of any of the dozens of great minds assembled were totally voided from the very first hour of the very first day. From that point, my plans

were more about getting through each day and evening sans meal breaks and other personal hopes and needs. And in those days I didn't even drink coffee!

The volunteers worked very, very hard and with great heart. It would be surprising if any of us have forgotten the noise of a not so solemn Assembly. Oh, and many of the volunteers were friends from Adelaide.

Recollections by Rev. Alistair Christie

Canberra Coordinator and Uniting Church minister.

Gathering Under the Southern Cross was an Australian welcome to the delegates and visitors to the WCC Seventh Assembly, held in Commonwealth Park on Sunday evening of 10th February 1991. For many people participating, that day began early. Tiered seating transported from St Edmund's College for the massed choir was in place. The choir was seated by 10am for a brief worship time listening to the gospel record of the Transfiguration and prayer before practice began. Much earlier huge flat top vehicles, which became a stage or carried television screens, were positioned so temporary power connection was made. Public conveniences appeared. Barbecues appeared, cool drinks, iced water and other essentials for the long day.

Three presentations "Introducing Ourselves", "Our Priorities and Enthusiasms" and "Why and When We Came" gave shape to the story of the nation revealed in music, film, dance, demonstrations. Moderators for the program were Dr Jill Tabart (a later UCA President) Mr Maged Attia (Coptic Orthodox) and Bishop Arthur Malcolm (Anglican). Many local people participated: Colin Slater and Don Whitbread (Choirs), Colin Fisher (Canberra City Band), with Brian Rope amongst them. Stan and Pauline Stewart were the producers. D'Arcy Wood wrote the script.

Recollections by Jenny Rowland

Volunteer and part-time visitor.

Before the Assembly I found myself assisting artist **Marlene Greenwood** of Kippax Uniting Church mount exhibitions for it. I ran an open day at City Church for locals who had joined other Australian Christians in embroidering A4 "patches" for giant displays at the Assembly. These exhibits were later dismantled and the embroidered patches distributed to delegates from around the world at the close of the Assembly. As a delegate, **Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood**

received one, which he displayed in his office at City Church.

I attended several days of the Assembly as a registered visitor at the National Convention Centre. I also helped at the large lunch run by **Justine Gibbings** and our Tongans at City Church on Sunday, 17 February 1991 for some of the Assembly delegates. They welcomed the opportunity of a public forum in which they could praise God and thank in speech or in song those who had made it possible for them to travel to the Assembly. I took three delegates from Bolivia on an organised visit to Rehwinkel's Animal Park (1974-1995) on the Mac's Reef Road, just north of Canberra. I also assisted at the large, multicultural worship experience in Commonwealth Park called "Gathering Under the

Southern Cross" (GUSC) on Sunday 10 February. For it both visitors and locals wore national costumes, some of which I had borrowed from embassies in Canberra. I was delighted that young Tongan friends, **Supilani and Sitauti Ma'ilei**, sons of **Ano and Hepi Ma'ilei**, had their photo in *The Canberra Times* the next day blowing a conch shell.

For many of us there are very positive memories of the 1991 World Council of Churches' Assembly as a significant ecumenical event right on our doorstep.

Jenny Rowland