Breaking silence in Harare

by Louie Crew

Last December, when the World Council of Churches (WCC) met in Harare, Zimbabwe for its 50th anniversary and its 8th Assembly, the WCC properly reminded us of the Council's distinguished record of risk-taking. Long before it was popular to do so, the WCC funded resistance groups fighting colonialism and apartheid in Africa, often over the strong protests of its constituents in power in those countries. The WCC has also consistently funded humanitarian relief for refugees in countries ripped apart by strife.

As important as they still are, these commitments are now safely in the mainstream and require few new risks for the Council. Many at the Assembly wondered whether the WCC could muster the will and the nerve to take up new and unpopular social justice issues for the marginalized.

Those gathered for the WCC's 50th anniversary in 1998 looked remarkably different from those gathered in 1448, each difference the result of a slow but steady change over the Council's five decades: Few women were present in 1948; in 1998 they were nearly 40 percent of the delegates. Few people of color were present in 1948; in 1998 they outnumbered whites; the Orthodox were not present in 1948, but joined the Council many years ago. In 1998 we assembled in Africa, not in Europe or North America.

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Debt and human rights

Two of the biggest new “issues” before the 8th Assembly were the debt crisis affecting impoverished countries in the “two-thirds world” and details of a new statement on human rights.

Delegates easily rallied to support debt relief; let’s hope that they will make just as forceful and cogent an effort to influence the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund through their own church members who participate in the decisions of those bodies.

U.S. delegates to the 8th WCC Assembly in Zimbabwe joined a human chain around the Assembly hall chanting, “Cancel the debt.” ENS/Jim Selkirk

With the new human rights statement, the Council exhibited embarrassing moral timidity: Several attempts to express concerns about the violation of human rights of lesbians and gays were blocked. The silence stares in the face horrendous abuses against the political and civil rights of lesbians and gays, such as those in the host country Zimbabwe and in many other parts of the world, where homosexuals are routinely fired from their jobs, cut off from benefits, jailed and otherwise persecuted. Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe routinely refers to lesbians and gays as “lower than pigs and dogs.”


An escape from scapegoating

Homosexuals are useful as scapegoats. But at the WCC 8th Assembly we were not used as scapegoats in the same way we were used at the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops held in England last summer (see TW’S-11/98). Why? No one knows for sure, but I offer some suggestions of my own.

First, Lambeth demonstrated a remarkable shift in power from bishops of the white north to bishops in the global south. The new majority agreed theologically and liturgically on few things, but most agreed in opposing homosexuality. Voting on the divisive issue became just too tempting to resist: It was a clear and concrete way to demonstrate the new hegemony.

Second, resolutions of the WCC are even less binding on members than are those of the Lambeth Conference on the provinces and dioceses of the Anglican Communion. Why invite a fuss? After all, in an ecumenical body as huge and diverse as the WCC, there are already far more divisions than there are in any one communion: Those who choose to take the WCC seriously are far less willing than were the bishops at Lambeth to push for a vote designed to have winners and losers.

Third, the most logical opponents to rally around an anti-LGBT agenda are themselves at great odds with each other, namely the Orthodox and the Evangelicals.

VITAL SIGNS

THE WITNESS
Repeatedly the 8th Assembly heard the Orthodox complain against the proselytizing of the Evangelicals, especially now that Evangelicals have easier access to Orthodox countries previously isolated by the Iron Curtain.

**Zimbabwe's contribution to the gentler response**

Zimbabwe itself gave two gifts that helped to minimize the risk of gay bashing at Harare: First was President Mugabe himself. Mugabe is Zimbabwe's very own “Fred Phelps” (the Kansas-based homophobe who pickets Episcopal Church conventions, calling us the “Fag Church”). Even those who have no particular welcome for lesbians and gays want to disassociate themselves from Mugabe's patently self-serving and hateful rhetoric. Any attempt to mobilize against lesbians would have invited Mugabe to step into the leadership, and few wanted to give him that opportunity.

[Before returning to speak to the Assembly on December 8th, Mugabe had spent only seven days in Zimbabwe in all of 1998. Meanwhile, during this same year, the Zimbabwe dollar fell 70 percent against the U.S. dollar. Mugabe managed to toe the line and avoid mentioning lesbians when he addressed the Assembly, but after the meeting broke up, he could not resist and told a reporter that the WCC is the proper body to “purge homosexuals.”]

**Padires**

The second gift of Zimbabwe was more positive: the Shona tradition of *Padires*. A “padires” is a meeting place for common deliberation. The WCC used *padires* as opportunities to explore differences. *Padires* are not tied to any legislative agenda. They are strictly for discussion. They encourage respectful listening. There were hundreds of padires on a full range of subjects throughout the Assembly. The 22 *padires* devoted explicitly to lesbian/gay issues were among those best attended. In the second week many had to be turned away because of lack of space. These sessions had the ironic effect of the common worship tables and Bible study initiated at the 1988 General Convention in Detroit. It's very hard for persons on either side of issues to demonize each other when we pray together and share our stories.

In addition, opposition to lesbians was largely forced underground at Harare. The Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) stalked us, albeit clumsily. Signs announcing our meetings were torn down. We replaced them so stealthily that after a while the vandals gave up.

On only one occasion did homophobia turn truly nasty. Melinda Medew of Fiji showed me a nasty bruise on her arm and explained that she got it at a padires featuring Those who choose to take the WCC seriously are far less willing than were the bishops at Lambeth to push for a vote on homosexuality to designed to have winners and losers.

**Cristli Ruth Vonholdt**, a German psychologist whom the American Anglican Council had brought to the Lambeth Conference. At both meetings Evangelicals distributed hundreds of copies of a book in which Vonholdt claims to “heal” homosexuals.

"After 45 minutes of Vonholdt’s hate speech," Medew told me, "I asked whether we would be allowed to respond to the false witness against us. We were told we could not reply, and some of the young African gays stormed out. I saw two of them crying. I wanted to stay in the padires rather than to give the presenters license to continue to harass us in our absence, but I also wanted to be available to my African brothers. As I stood in the doorway, one of Dr. Vonholdt's compatriots shoved the door to make me leave."

The WCC bureaucracy also forced some of the opposition to lesbians to go underground in the way that it opposed lesbian/gay subjects from being named in the new WCC human rights resolution as much as many of us feel that it should be.

**Support without forcing a vote**

United Church of Christ moderator Paul Sherry made the most forceful support of lesbians at the Assembly, and he did so by specifically refusing to amend the human rights resolution in ways that would force a decision which supporters of lesbians would most certainly have lost. "I speak in support of the proposed policy statement on human rights," he began gently. "However, I am saddened that the statement does not more sharply specify those whose basic human rights are severely threatened, particularly gay and lesbian people. Therefore, though I do not intend to offer an amendment to the draft document, it is my urgent hope that we as the World Council of Churches, after our differences in understanding regarding sexual orientation, will increasingly commit ourselves to protect the basic human rights of gay and lesbian people. I understand and respect the differing theological postures on the appropriateness of homosexual orientation. But that is not the issue here. Rather, the issue is the protection of basic human rights for all God's children, without exception. Otherwise, I fear our stated commitments will increasingly ring hollow. Every day gay and lesbian people face verbal abuse, physical harm, and even death. A year ago, Amnesty International documented scores of instances in countries all over the globe in which individuals are being targeted for imprisonment, torture and murder simply on the grounds of their sexual orientation. In my own country, but a few weeks ago, a young college student was brutally beaten and hung on a fence to die, simply because he was gay. The silence, the midst of this ugliness, is deafening. I urge us all to break the silence."

**GALZ**

One of the most moving experiences for me was the opportunity of getting to know and work with Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), a group of several hundred members. GALZ is not primarily a secular group, as it has been portrayed by the press. Most
members are involved in faith communities. All but one of their major leaders are black. One woman is a Baptist minister. Her straight sister is a member of GALZ in support of her, and at great risk, since she is employed as a secretary to the Secretary of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), an organization which has been particularly pernicious in its treatment of GALZ. The parents of the sisters were murdered when they had political differences with the government.

Given the obsessive hostility towards homosexuality in this country, the WCC was hesitant in accepting the ZCC’s invitation to have us meet here. To woo the Council, the ZCC made overtures to GALZ to meet with them and to educate themselves regarding lesbians and gays. In good faith, and with some surprise at the welcome, GALZ members at great risk came to meet with them and to share details of their lives. Many ZCC members expressed surprise that GALZ members were Christians and on a faith journey. The ZCC also engaged the considerable talents of GALZ members to help in the drafting of statements to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights. [Once the WCC issued the invitation, however, the ZCC immediately treated GALZ as anathema. Contacts with them was dramatically reduced, and hostile statements regarding homosexuality poured forth from ZCC, especially from the Anglican Bishop of Zimbabwe, echoing the rabid statements of the country’s president.]

Overall, the Assembly seems to me to have been a great success as a means for lesbians to educate the church universal. Lesbians responded to that challenge with great dedication and care. More and more churches will come to the 9th WCC Assembly in 2005 eager to learn about their lesbian neighbors, and many more straights will come to report of their faith journeys with their lesbians.

Before we left Harare, over 75 lesbians present constituted ourselves as The International Lesbian and Gay Christian Network (ILGCN).

Nuclear gambling

The Episcopal Peace Fellowship (EPF) is combining this year’s annual conference with a pilgrimage to the Nevada Nuclear Test Site as part of the Healing Global Wounds Mother’s Day Event, led by Corbin Harney of the Western Shoshone. The May 7-10 weekend will begin in Las Vegas with speakers who will address the effects of nuclear testing on the land and on the lives of people who live near the test site. There will also be an opportunity to join a nonviolent civil disobedience action at the test site. For info: <www.nonviolence.org/epf>, or call EPF’s Washington, D.C. office at 202-783-3380.

Aided by Phoebe Griswold (wife of the Episcopal Church’s presiding bishop), the Bishop of Honduras, Leo Frade, and members of a local Anglican congregation, along with a youth brigade, distribute food and other supplies to local residents. The supplies were funded by the Presiding Bishop’s Fund for World Relief.

With 90 percent of Honduras’ banana crop wiped out, $255 million in banana exports have been lost for two years at least. In Nicaragua, 30 percent of the banana crop was destroyed and across Central America thousands of acres of sugar cane, coffee, tobacco, pineapples, melons and vegetables are gone. The losses mean hundreds of thousands of people may be without income for months or longer. Crop losses mean job losses in these countries where per capita annual incomes average $1,900 or less.

“The process of reconstruction must focus on the people, not just the infrastructure,” says Noemi Espinosa, president of the Christian Commission for Development in Honduras. “Many of those who died or disappeared during the storm lived at the margins of society, on riverbeds around the edges of industrial areas or on steep hillsides in the country. They were the expendable ones about whom the government has never been concerned. As we begin to rebuild our country, they must be taken seriously. They must be taken into consideration.” — Nan Cobbey (Cobbey is features editor for Episcopal Life, the national newspaper for Episcopalians, <ncobbey@dism.org>. For information on how to make donations to the Presiding Bishop’s Fund for World Relief call them at 1-800-334-7626.)