

## EVANSTON AFTER FIFTY YEARS

By Norman A. Hjelm

*Norman A. Hjelm is a former director of communication and subsequently acting deputy general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. He attended the WCC assembly in Evanston in 1954 as a youth delegate.*

It is fully half a century since the second assembly of the World Council of Churches was held in Evanston, Illinois. To date, this is the only WCC assembly to have been held in the United States. Incumbent US president Dwight D. Eisenhower welcomed the delegates and, speaking as "a single member of one of the constituent bodies of this council of churches", challenged them to mobilize their communions for "an intense act of faith" that would summon Christians everywhere to "the devotion, wisdom and stamina to work unceasingly for a just and lasting peace".

Over the course of fifty years, experiences fade and even memories are blurred. So it is with the Evanston assembly, held in August 1954. At least so it is to this person, now a retiree but then a youth delegate. But two personal experiences, never to be recorded in official annals of the assembly, stand out. Both were striking to me in 1954, and both reflected major concerns facing the World Council of Churches at the time.

The first memory I have was of a service of worship which brought together youth from many parts of the world. It was held in one of the Evanston parish churches, attended by several hundred persons. What I remember most clearly was how startled - if not offended - the German participants were at the choice of the opening hymn for the service. The hymn, sung from an American Lutheran hymnal, was "Glorious things of thee are spoken". The words were fine, by John Newton, but it was the melody! It had been written in 1791 by Franz Joseph Haydn: "Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser". Not only was this melody subsequently used by Haydn in a string quartet, it later became the German national anthem, as it continued to be at the time of World War II, with the all too memorable opening line "Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles". To sing this

melody seemed blasphemous to German participants. After all, the Evanston assembly was held only nine years after that war's end, and the wounds were not yet healed.

The fact that this was only the second post-war assembly was marked throughout the event. The assembly's theme itself, Christ - the hope of the world, set off theological fireworks not unrelated to the experiences of war. Europeans tended to view this theme in apocalyptic terms, a view dominated by the world's apparent hopelessness as demonstrated through the war. North Americans, on the other hand, tended to view Christian hope progressively, hailing present efforts towards building the kingdom of God in the midst of human society. The major addresses by Edmund Schlink of Heidelberg and Robert Calhoun of Yale stood in stark contrast to each other. In many ways this division now seems passé, to some at least, but in the development of many churches and individuals (myself included) these "sharp differences in theological viewpoint", as an Evanston report put it, were and remain important.

The second memory I have is a private one. The Evanston assembly was held in the United States of Dwight Eisenhower, but the ascendancy of Senator Joseph McCarthy was soon to achieve its zenith. There was a hesitancy on the part of the American government to grant visas to many, particularly persons from Eastern Europe who might have presented what is now called "a security risk". Nevertheless, certain Eastern European church leaders were allowed to participate in the assembly, although most often they were not allowed to leave the quiet university town of Evanston. Someone asked me - I can't believe it was any kind of official request - to spend time with and keep my eye on László Dezséry, a Lutheran bishop from Hungary who, we later learned through bitter church experience, probably had a greater allegiance to his government than his church. This was a daunting assignment for a twenty-three-year-old seminary student. The bishop was allowed to go with me to the assembly service at Soldiers' Field in Chicago, a service attended by more than 100,000 persons. We marched together in the procession when suddenly we were each pointed in a different direction - and ended up on opposite sides of the enormous football stadium. I thought I was part of an international incident...

Thus was it first demonstrated to me that not only were governments on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain, but churches themselves were separated from one another on political and ideological grounds. The World Council was just feeling its way out of the climate created by World War II, and feeling its way into a new situation - East / West - that was to last for another thirty-five years. At Evanston, perhaps, we did not know quite what we were getting into.

The assembly, of course, was a major step forward for the WCC. It has often been said that if the motto of the first assembly at Amsterdam in 1948 was "staying together", the watchword at Evanston was "growing together". In fact, in reaffirming the Amsterdam covenant, the Evanston assembly stated: "But beyond that, as the Holy Spirit may guide us, we intend to unite."

There were seeds planted at Evanston in a host of fields, among them:

1. A theological statement concerning the assembly theme was received from the Roman Catholic Church. It came too late to be acted on, but it was a harbinger of what would become normal ecumenical practice after Vatican II.
2. Debate over the assembly theme included a reference to Christ as being "the hope of Israel". This phrase produced a jarring conflict and was dropped from consideration. This was not a high point of interfaith dialogue.
3. The Amsterdam view of a "responsible society" was clarified and sharpened at Evanston, a crucial step - now of primarily historical interest - in the development of ecumenical social thought.
4. The report of the assembly section on "The churches amid racial and ethnic tensions" resulted in the establishment of a WCC department for racial and ethnic relations. That department, in turn, paved the way for the later creation of the Programme to Combat Racism.
5. There was serious discussion of religious liberty in international perspective that led to the establishment in 1958 of a WCC secretariat for such questions.

One other event at Evanston made an indelible impression on this youth delegate. It was the address "An instrument of faith", given on 20 August, 1954 by Dag Hammarskjöld, secretary-general of the United Nations. Rarely would the World

Council of Churches receive so moving and important a statement from one of the century's towering statesmen. His address became for many, including myself, a precursor to his posthumously published *Markings*, one of the few truly great spiritual classics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The final words of his Evanston address epitomize for me the entire assembly (I quote from the report on the main theme of this assembly).

For the Christian faith 'the Cross is that place at the center of the world's history ... where all men and all nations without exception stand revealed as enemies of God ... and yet where all men stand revealed as beloved of God, precious in God's sight'. So understood, the Cross, although it is the unique fact on which the Christian Churches base their hope, should not separate those of Christian faith from others but should instead be that element in their lives which enables them to stretch out their hands to peoples of other creeds in the feeling of universal brotherhood which we hope one day to see reflected in a world of nations truly united.

Today the World Council of Churches looks forward to convening at Porto Alegre in February 2006. Its tenth assembly will be held in a different climate, a different culture, a different continent. But though times and seasons may have changed during the fifty years since the second assembly at Evanston, the challenge before us endures. Even more enduring is Christ - our hope - who continues to assure us of God's gracious will for the transformation of the world.