

RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



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From the Director's Desk

Why the NCC is in Disarray and What Can be Done About It

The story is told of Mark Twain picking up the paper one day and reading a notice of his own death. A bemused Twain fired off to the editors the following response: "Reports of my demise are greatly exaggerated."

Undoubtedly, officials of the National Council of Churches would like to believe that their situation is the same as Mark Twain's. Unfortunately, reports of the patient's health, including those issued by the patient himself, are extremely grave.

The real value of contributions to the NCC has gone steadily down for many years. Staffing has been drastically cut and there has been serious infighting among the senior staff. Not even Church World Service, the council's relief agency, has been spared the budgetary axe.

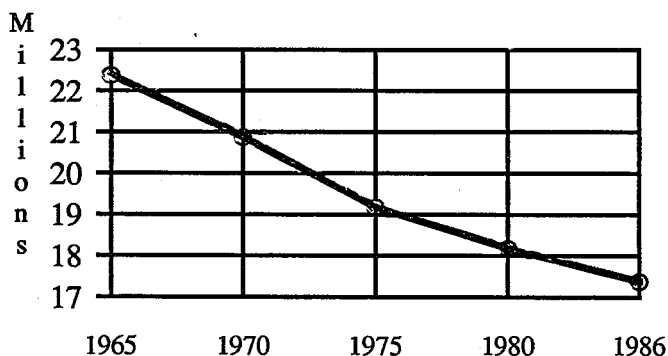
Arie Brouwer, the NCC General Secretary, recently conceded that his part of the Protestant world is "likely to be known as oldline or even sideline," rather than "mainline." Indeed, membership decline among the five largest oldline denominations has been so severe during the 1970s and well into the 1980s that the equivalent of a 700-member congregation was shut down *every day* for 15 years. Millions more have stayed, but are deeply distressed.

Two factors at least are pivotal in explaining the decline. First, and most importantly, the politicization of the Church (the tendency to replace a spiritual with a political agenda) has damaged the spiritual integrity and witness of the Church. Second, political positions taken by the oldline churches often do not represent -- and often even offend -- the moderate and conservative majorities in the churches.

A spiritual atrophy can be found among church moderates and conservatives, as among liberals. How else can one explain the failure of moderates and conservatives to exercise judicious stewardship of their churches' influence and money? It takes spiritual courage and strength to refuse to be intimidated by the religious Left's threats of labeling as "divisive," "conservative," and even "reactionary," any questioning of their positions. The courage to confront has been sorely absent.

At first glance, as Alan Wisdom's lead article makes clear ("NCC Shaken by Crisis"), the NCC seems contrite and even confessional in acknowledging the depth of its present crisis. However, in "Up to the Same Old Mischief," Mr. Wisdom documents that the rhetoric of repentance is not matched

Membership Decline in Top Five Churches
Contributing to the NCC, 1965 - 1986*



* Source: *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches 1988*, edited by Constant H. Jaquet, Jr. (Abingdon Press, 1988). Denominations: Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Episcopal Church, and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

by the reality of changed behavior. The political pronouncements which dominated at the recent fall Governing Board meeting were distressingly typical. *The political agenda has NOT changed.* Nor, as Mr. Wisdom convincingly argues, is Church World Service immune to the problems of the rest of the council.

This is no time for the critics of the NCC to gloat. It is a time to mourn. Cosmetic restructuring and endless task force studies are not the answer. The decline can only be stopped by genuine spiritual renewal and a much more modest and responsible engagement in the legitimate tasks of promoting peace and justice.

The solution lies not in replacing the political agenda of the religious Left with that of the religious Right, or even of the IRD. The solution lies in all of us recommitting ourselves to the primacy of the churches' spiritual task. Further, we ought to work together to develop a much more responsible and less partisan church involvement in the vital political issues of our day.

Kent Hill

NCC Shaken by Crisis

The National Council of Churches has tried rearranging the boxes on its organizational chart. It has tried new faces in its leadership. It has tried a more media-friendly approach to public relations. Yet nothing has arrested the decline of the NCC. Finally, the time has come to recognize that the council's problems lie deeper than its structure or its image.

The NCC meetings last fall witnessed a convulsion of distress at the state of the council. There was an outpouring of pained admissions of failure and weakness. A special con-

"More than once in the past, we have healed our wounds lightly through such an approach. We cannot afford it again...."

-- NCC General Secretary Arie Brouwer

sultation of mainline church officials declared, "We confess before God that we have not been able to embody the full ecumenical vision of a 'community of communions.'" The officials reported, "The Council has lost some of its credibility with its constituent communions, and has experienced an erosion of its constituency support." They traced the organization's crisis back to a faltering of the faith on which it was founded: "The changing place of the NCC member communions in the national culture, the loss of membership in many of the classical Protestant churches, and the pervasive influence of secularism have not been countered by spiritual renewal in the churches and thus have tended to weaken the Council as a whole."

NCC General Secretary Arie Brouwer sounded humbled. He spoke of "the disestablishment of mainline Protestantism," even borrowing a phrase from IRD board member Richard Neuhaus: "Today we are likely to be known as the old-line or even the sideline churches, instead of mainline" (*The New York Times*, Nov. 4, 1988). Brouwer warned the NCC Governing Board that the council could not be repaired by merely superficial alterations:

More than once in the past, we have healed our wounds lightly through such an approach. We cannot afford it again.... The task we face requires going to the root of the matter and requires a radical restructuring -- and not moving boxes around, but more than that. Such a restructuring will not be about organizational boxes, (but) about analysis of the world in which we live, about strategy for mission, about embodying the everlasting gospel in today's world.

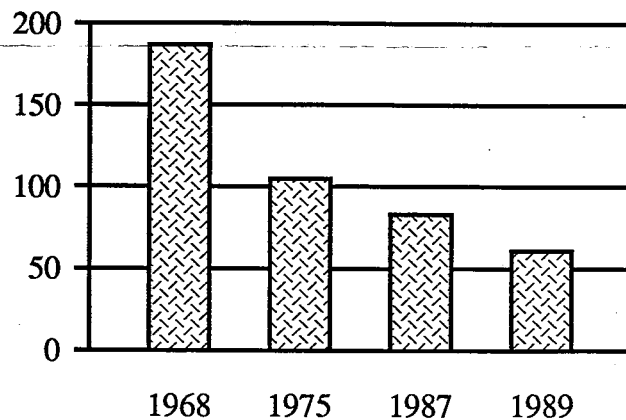
What prompted this new tone among NCC leaders? Apparently, they at last got the message that speaks clearest: money -- less of it. According to an NCC staff analysis, contributions to the council from member communions decreased in real value by 53 percent between 1975 and 1987. The analysis predicts a continuing decline of at least five percent annually over the next several years. Recently the financial drought has touched even what had been the NCC's best-supported unit, Church World Service. The relief agency's basic services budget has fallen from \$7.0 million in 1987 to \$6.4 million in 1988 to a projected \$5.1 million in 1989.

With this loss of funding have come sharp staff cutbacks, reaching now to the highest levels of the NCC. Staffers such as Associate General Secretary Peggy Shriver, laid off after decades of service to the council, could not hide their pain as they said farewell to the Governing Board. Others who resigned last year -- notably Church World Service Director Richard Butler and Human Rights Director William Wipfler -- departed with bitter blasts of criticism. They accused General Secretary Brouwer of an excessively "hierarchical" style of leadership which stifled creativity and dissent.

The NCC staff analysis attributes the council's funding shortfall to broader negative trends in the mainline churches: both a shrinking membership and a diminished commitment to benevolences (causes outside the local congregation). Benevolence giving in five major denominations was down 47 percent, in constant dollars, between 1975 and 1986.

(NCC, continued on page 3)

**NCC Elected Professional Staff Reductions
1968 - 1989**



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Still Grieving and Feuding over the Last Reform

NCC leaders thought they had the solution to their problems back in 1984, with the recommendations of a special Presidential Panel. On the premise that public mistrust of the council was due to a lack of accountability in its programs, the panel called for a closer integration of NCC units under the authority of the Governing Board and the General Secretary. To counter the autonomy that some units gained through gifts designated to themselves alone, the NCC was to deduct a "common services charge" from all units' income. This charge would pay for administrative costs and other less popular -- often politically controversial -- NCC activities.

But the Presidential Panel recommendations were never fully followed, nor did those that were carried out restore confidence in the council. The committee which oversaw implementation of the reform plan finally threw up its hands in surrender. It concluded, in a report to the Governing Board last November, that its mandate had proved impossible:

The communions in the NCC have not shown unanimity in willingness or ability to bring all parts of the NCC program into an integrated whole. There seems to be a continuing desire to designate resources available for specific programs carried out by NCC units. There seems to be an inability or unwillingness to provide equal or increased resources as undesignated support for the program and service of the NCC as a whole.



The Rev. Dr. Arie Brouwer (left), General Secretary of the NCC, and J. Richard Butler, then Executive Director of Church World Service. Butler resigned after clashing repeatedly with Brouwer.

The committee pointed a finger at denominational agency staffers, who were said to prefer designated contributions as a means of dictating the programs of the recipient council units. The staffers thus frustrated the expressed will of their churches' representatives on the NCC Governing Board, who had approved the Presidential Panel's proposals. In his address to the Governing Board last fall, Arie Brouwer asked

(NCC, continued on page 5)

Up to the Same Old Mischief

For those hopeful that the National Council of Churches might finally forsake its foolish ways, last November's Governing Board meeting did not provide much evidence of a fresh start. While NCC leaders grimly confessed to having earned the label "sideline churches," and vowed "radical restructuring," they seemed unable to lay off the political spirits which had contributed to their downfall. Their meetings were permeated by the same old left-leaning agenda. Whenever they paused from discussing council structure to hear a guest speaker or vote on a resolution, the message was the same:

America -- and particularly Ronald Reagan and George Bush -- is to blame. And to that message there was no disagreement expressed, from the platform or the floor.

One of the highlights of the meeting was a special "service of thanksgiving" commemorating the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. But before giving thanks, the Governing Board heard two "witnesses to truth," who had some axes to grind. Feliciano Carino of the National Council of Churches of the Philippines attacked the democratic, U.S.-supported administration of Corazon Aquino as "a government built on a foundation of lies." He declared, "We

The NCC leaders seemed willing to re-examine their structure, but not to redirect their course.

are suffering in the Philippines today a democratization of terror." Carino also interjected a comment on U.S. politics, saying "we could only shout in great dismay" upon learning that George Bush was bound for the White House.

Peggy Hutchison, who has been convicted for her work in the sanctuary movement, denounced "the U.S.-sponsored war war in Central America." Referring to U.S. aid to the democratic government of El Salvador, she claimed, "U.S. tax dollars pay for death."

But, Hutchison asserted, Salvadorans cherish "an insurgent hope that will not be bombed away by your bombs." William Wipfler, outgoing Director of the NCC's Human Rights Office, drew the lesson at the close of the service: "Peggy has shown how our government can use duplicity and lies.... We are complicit in the violation of human rights." Neither Wipfler nor any other service participant mentioned any such complicity on the part of the Soviet Union or its communist allies.

The featured speaker at another session was Dr. Christopher Duraisingh, the incoming head of the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

(Mischief, continued on page 4)

Duraisingh gave his version of biblical economics, which requires U.S. church aid to the Third World on the basis not of charity but of atonement for our national sin:

The wealth of the few rich in the world is not the blessing of God, but the consequence of human sinfulness. That is the declaration of Jubilee: that some among the people of God have more, at the expense of many, not because God has blessed them, but because something is wrong in the distribution pattern. And therefore Jubilee is the time in which you redistribute. So what is called for is not sharing but reparation.

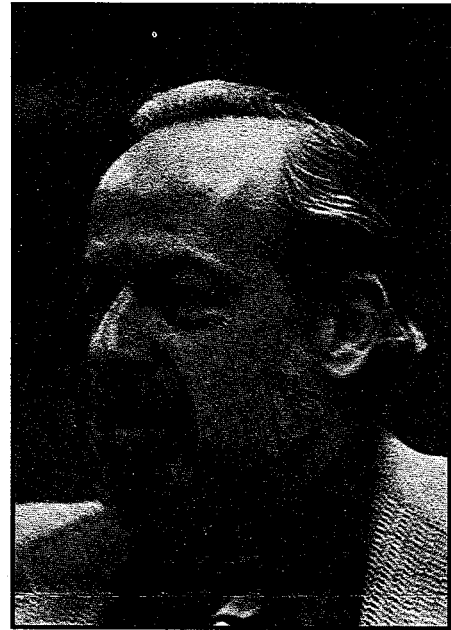
Author Jonathan Kozol was invited to deliver an address on homelessness. While vividly describing this sad situation, he delivered a few partisan shots as well. Kozol caricatured

Either this overwhelming bias is the accidental result of a total lack of authority within the council, or else it represents a serious, systematic politicization of the NCC's vision of Christian mission.

Ronald Reagan as a modern-day Scrooge: "This is the message of the Reagan administration (to the poor): 'No benefits. Case closed.'" He spoke condescendingly of volunteers who will help the homeless and then vote Republican: "They sure vote strange. These people vote solid for Bush and Reagan. I do a lot to reach out to these people.... Acts of charity, if unaccompanied by strong political momentum, are very dangerous in our society."

At this Governing Board meeting, the council churned out its quota of political resolutions with even greater speed and less debate than usual. Resolutions on AIDS testing, homelessness, toxic waste, and church-state relations were all discussed and passed in a mere 15 minutes. The report of the Associate General Secretary for Public Policy indicated that the NCC has been lobbying as actively as ever in Washington. It listed 58 separate messages from the council to Congress or the administration, covering 32 different issues, during the first nine months of 1988.... Among the issues on which NCC staffers endorsed or opposed specific legislation: contra aid, sanctions against South Africa, child care, immigration, school prayer, the death penalty, farm credit mediation programs, municipal garbage incinerator ash disposal, and the U.S./Japan plutonium agreement.

The NCC's Southern Asia Office also distributed a new study guide on *The Afghan Crisis*. Readers might be grateful to see the council at last take notice of what is happening in Afghanistan; however, the perspective adopted is highly skewed. Avoiding the term "invasion" to describe what the Soviets did in 1979, the guide urges "the need to understand Soviet concerns and interests in Afghanistan." Such an understanding, it suggests, would undercut "the claim of wanton Soviet brutality" and "power projection." Instead the NCC office document portrays the Soviet action as the natural defensive response of a threatened superpower. Blame for the invasion is even shifted partially onto the United States:



William Wipfler, outgoing Director of the NCC's Human Rights Office. Wipfler blamed the United States for human rights abuses around the world.

... the USSR was also made uneasy by the prospect of diminished influence beneath its southern border, the growth of religious fundamentalism and nationalism in the region, and the perceived possibility of US military intervention in Southwest Asia.... As Western support to the fundamentalist (Afghan) resistance grew, an essential Soviet foreign policy priority - that the countries along its borders not become anti-Soviet powers - appeared threatened. The Soviet fear of hostile neighbors and global encirclement, perhaps due to the experience of being invaded three times since its founding, is widely thought to be a principal motive for the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan.

The guide criticizes U.S. aid to the Afghan guerrillas, encouraging readers to write Congress to have it terminated. According to the NCC Southern Asia Office, support for the anti-communist resistance: "undermines legitimate authorities and benefits those indigenous figures who seek power through force and violence," "has escalated the violence within Afghanistan and contributed to the death of thousands of Afghan non-combatants," and "has also given credence to Afghanistan's argument that foreign intervention in its international affairs required the assistance of Soviet troops." The implication is that if we would just leave the Afghans to the tender care of their Soviet overlords, peace would soon break out, and all would be well in Afghanistan.

This study guide carries a disclaimer: "This is not an official NCCUSA study paper nor does it represent a position of the NCCUSA." Perhaps the NCC would wish to apply the same disclaimer to all the other leftist pronouncements made during its meetings. Yet all the speakers and documents were commissioned, funded, and presented under the auspices of NCC units. And there were no speakers or documents expressing opposing points of view. Either this overwhelming bias is the accidental result of a total lack of authority within the council, or else it represents a serious, systematic politicization of the NCC's vision of Christian mission. In either case, the NCC will have to do a lot more reforming and repenting before it comes back to health.

-- AFW

its members "to pause for a moment in order publicly to grieve for the passing of the Presidential Panel Design."

The loudest opposition to the panel design had come from Church World Service. CWS officials especially resented having to bear the burden of rising common services charges. They condemned the charges as a diversion of donors' money away from the intended charitable work, and they argued that these subsidies to the rest of the NCC had aggravated CWS's own budget crunch. In protest, several denominational relief agencies stopped routing disaster assistance funds through Church World Service. On November 29 the CWS committee requested that the agency be "reconstituted as a discrete organization," independent of the NCC, with "full responsibility and authority" for its own policies, finances, and personnel.

A New Model Council?

With the Presidential Panel design in tatters, and Church World Service in almost open revolt, the word on all lips at the NCC meetings last fall was "crisis." That there was a crisis, and that it was profound, was universally acknowledged. On what to do about it, though, there was no consensus. To use theological terms, attrition and even contrition were quite obvious, but no decisive move toward repentance and restoration was made.

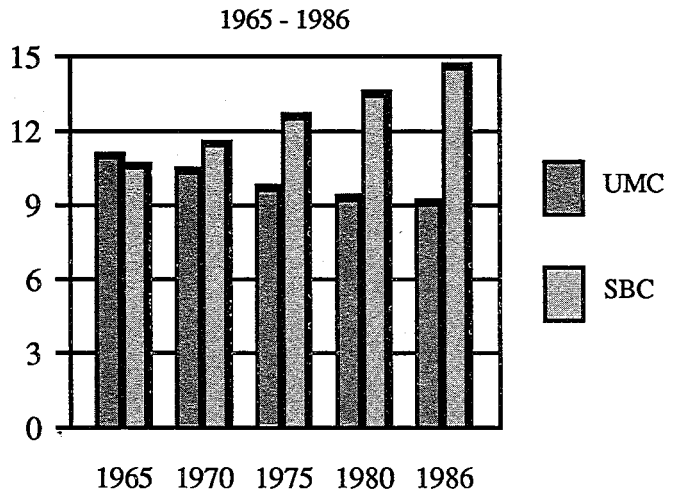
The special consultation of church leaders, October 30-November 1, suggested two possible models for a revamped ecumenical body. The "unity model" would move the council toward further centralization, establishing a "wholistic planning process" to produce a single, prioritized NCC budget. Denominational support would have to flow along the lines of that budget. By contrast, the "essential core/coalitional model" would bring decentralization. Only certain essential ecumenical functions would belong to a reduced NCC "core," under the Governing Board. Other present NCC programs -- perhaps, for example, Church World Service -- would become independent. These might cooperate with the council in coalitions of mutual interest, but they would no longer be regarded as representative of or responsible to the NCC.

Many of the NCC leaders predicted that the two models might somehow be merged, with greater centralization of a smaller core council. There was no agreement, however, on how to define the "essential" functions of a new model NCC. Would political advocacy be at its core, or matters of faith and order? The Rev. J. Roger Schrock of the Church of the Brethren, who helped draft the consultation report, admitted, "If you talk to three different people, you'll probably get three different interpretations of what this means." David Heim of *The Christian Century* gave a somewhat cynical interpretation:

... the strong units -- those with substantial support from the denominations -- will be outside the core of the council, while the weak units -- with little money and small constituencies -- will be inside. This may offer a more realistic approach to ecumenical work, and clearly some alternative to the present arrangement is needed; whether it constitutes an advance for the ecumenical movement is another matter. (Nov. 16, 1988)

But all the talk of "radical restructuring," the discussion of the different models for the NCC, remained

Comparison in Membership Changes
United Methodists and Southern Baptists



quite theoretical. In the end, the Governing Board handed the whole issue -- unresolved -- to yet another select panel. This new fifteen-member "Special Action Committee" is supposed to devise its solutions in time for the next Governing Board meeting, in May. Even some Governing Board members doubted whether they would really see a fundamental change in the NCC. The Rev. Paul Crow of the Disciples of Christ warned:

We cannot give organizational responses to faith problems. Unless there is a new claiming of the vision, any organizational structural proposal will be received with calm acceptance but with no commitment.... We will never organize ourselves into reconciliation.

But amidst all the excruciating (though vague) confessions of "crisis," not one voice was publicly raised in the NCC Governing Board to address the council's faith problem: the drift away from a Christ-centered vision of ecumenical mission and toward a more partisan political agenda. In fact, that latter agenda surfaced repeatedly -- without criticism -- in the program of the Governing Board meeting. The NCC leaders seemed willing to re-examine their structure, but not to redirect their course.

Reaching Out -- From a Sinking Ship

The report of the NCC consultation did drop one intriguing new hint. It stated, "Churches currently joined in the NCC desire to reach out in Christian love and on a basis of equality and openness to other communions, including the Roman Catholic Church and conservative evangelical churches, in order that the institutional manifestation of our unity might embrace all who profess Christ as the head of the Church." More incisively, the report added, "Such a process would entail a willingness on the part of the NCC and its programs to die that new life might spring forth as a stronger witness to our unity in Christ."

Indeed, if the NCC truly wants to draw closer to Catholics and evangelicals, it might have to let a large part of itself die. Episcopal Bishop David Reed, Secretary of the NCC, observed that the council would have to "change what we are" before Catholics and evangelicals could feel at home in it. Because of the theological and political differences between itself and those groups, Bishop Reed said, an NCC including them could not pronounce on as many issues. It would have to stop "shooting its mouth off all the time."

Such reticence would be a startling and welcome development at the NCC. But will the political activists on the council's staff consent to deny their ideological impulses, just to please their Catholic and evangelical brethren? Until that occurs -- and it does not look likely anytime soon -- Catholics and evangelicals will ask themselves what incentive they have to climb aboard the sinking NCC ship. The Rev. Thadeus Horgan of the U.S. Catholic Conference told *The National Catholic Register* (Nov. 20, 1988):

It will be up to the NCC to sell us on why it's to our advantage to be involved. Our interest in such a group is pragmatic: How would it facilitate our mission and purpose in the country? We're not interested in an illusory unity.

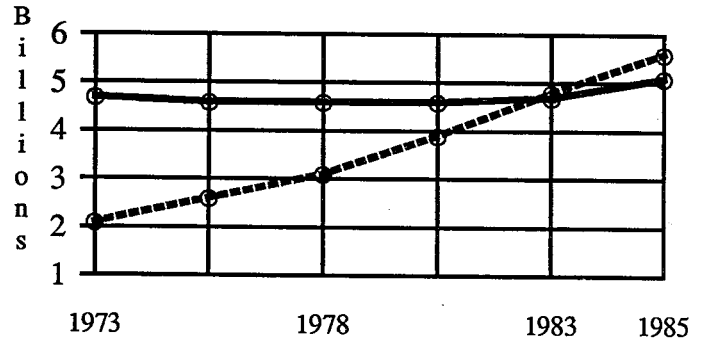
Billy Melvin, Executive Director of the National Association of Evangelicals, was equally nonplussed. His only response, in an interview with *World* magazine (Nov. 14, 1988), was that his organization would consider cooperation with any church group that would work under the NAE's conservative statement of faith. Melvin also gave his view that the NCC's troubles showed that "the liberal track of Protestantism has run its course and been found wanting."

So if the NCC will not soon be transformed, either through internal repentance or through a broader alliance with other churches, what is to become of it? Will it simply shrivel away, starved for funds and consumed in bureaucratic power struggles? Are its current convulsions merely the onset of its death? Not necessarily. The Rev. Dean Kelley, NCC Director for Civil and Religious Liberty, and a longtime observer of the decline of the mainline and the rise of the conservative churches, noted to Religious News Service (Nov. 4, 1988) that "there is apparently no clear life span to a religious body." Citing examples of ancient churches which still barely survive, Kelley said: "Religion has remarkable longevity, even though it may be at a low energy level. They tend to become somewhat encysted -- somewhat fossilized."

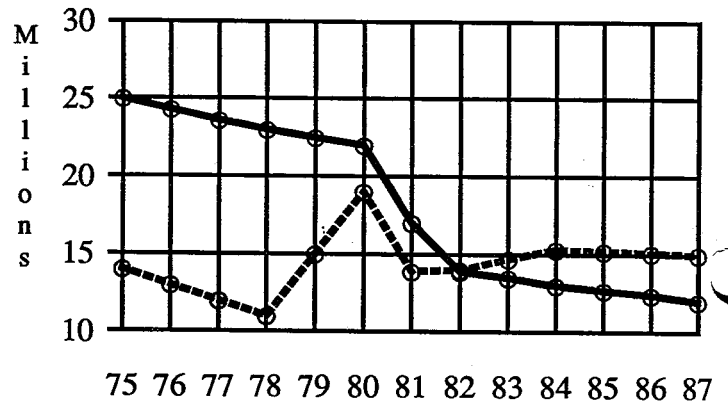
And as long as there remains any life at all in the NCC -- however encysted it may become -- those Christians who belong to its community of communions have a responsibility to nurture that life and to point it toward the mission Christ gave it. After all, we serve a God who says even to the dry bones of his people: "I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD" (Ezekiel 37:6).

-- Alan Wisdom

Total Contributions to Churches in Five NCC Denominations 1973 -- 1985



Member Contributions to the NCC, 1975 -- 1987



_____ Constant \$\$
 Actual \$\$

As oldline churchgoers' offerings have tripled, but barely kept up with inflation, contributions to the NCC have remained flat, losing over half of their buying power.

Correction

An article in the December 1988 *Religion & Democracy* incorrectly described a conference held in Chile in 1972. Its title was "Christians for Socialism." Ernesto Cardenal attended, but not Fidel Castro. Castro had visited Chile in 1971 and met with leaders planning the conference, and Cardenal had visited Cuba before going to the conference, but the two men were not together in Chile.

Church World Service

Can It Escape the Wreck of the NCC?

To hear Church World Service officials tell it, their agency's troubles would be much relieved if they could just cut their ties to the NCC. They complain that the council -- with its financial exactions, its bureaucratic meddling, and its bad public image -- is dragging down what would otherwise be a highly effective humanitarian ministry. So they propose to save Church World Service by launching it as an independent organization. The remaining thirty percent of the present NCC would be left to its own fate.

But would an independent CWS in fact be immune to the ills that have afflicted the whole National Council? Its base of support would lie in the same declining oldline denominations. Many of the same inefficiencies characterize the relief agency as the council. Of CWS's \$47 million of expenditures in 1987, fully 28 percent went to purposes other than relief and development. This figure includes nine percent each for management and fundraising, six percent "transmitted to other agencies" (mostly the common services charge paid to the NCC), and four percent for "public education." (Note that only the six percent "transmitted to other agencies" would be eliminated in an independent CWS.) This 28 percent figure appears strikingly high when compared with the 13 percent overhead in the Salvation Army or the 12 percent rate at the National Association of Evangelicals' relief agency. This disparity may be related to differences in mission philosophy between CWS and the other two groups.

Church World Service often displays an ideological tinge much like that seen in other divisions of the NCC. That four percent -- \$1.8 million -- budgeted for "public education" supports a lot of activity that might more properly be called "political advocacy." CWS has an Office of Development Policy which lobbies on Capitol Hill. Among the causes it has pushed are: stronger U.S. backing of the Marxist regime in Mozambique, an end to aid to the Nicaraguan contras, and the sanctuary movement's challenge to U.S. immigration laws. Larry Minear, head of the Office of Development Policy, was the author of a recent article on Afghanistan (*Christianity and Crisis*, Sept. 26, 1988) which questioned U.S. aid to the Afghan resistance and favored immediate U.S. cooperation with the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

CWS workers sometimes exploit their presumed humanitarian good faith to offer partisan interpretations of the areas they serve. Peggy Heiner, based in Nicaragua, spends her full time guiding visiting U.S. church delegations to a positive view of the Sandinista government. By contrast, CWS reports from El Salvador are sharply critical of its government. Similarly, CWS has been quick to condemn the South African government, but slow to judge that of Ethiopia. In 1985 Willis Logan, Director of the Africa Office, blamed U.S. "racism" -- not Ethiopian government policies -- for the mass starvation there.

Most often, CWS's slant appears in its choice of overseas partners. These do much genuine charitable work; however,

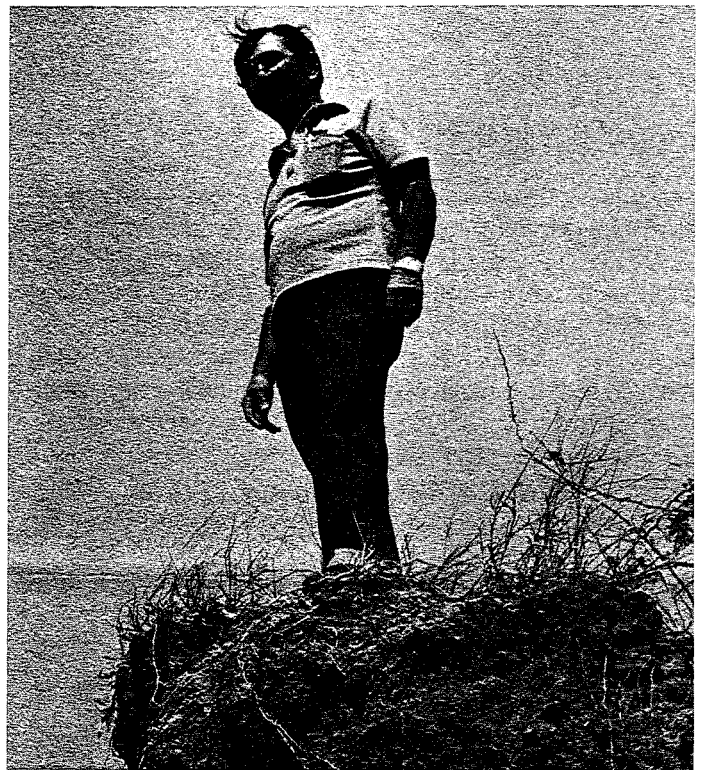


Photo courtesy of John Goodwin / UM Board of Global Ministries

Rudolfo Suarez, a Cuban hydrologist paid by CWS, stands over a broken dam in Kampuchea.

they frequently have a distinct political profile -- tilting to the left. CEPAD in Nicaragua works closely with and defends rhetorically the Sandinista government. The South Africa Council of Churches is generally identified with one specific anti-apartheid faction, the "charterists" who declare the African National Congress to be the vanguard of their liberation struggle. The National Council of Churches of the Philippines has become a fierce critic of the Aquino government there (see p. 3).

CWS's arrangements in Indochina might especially raise eyebrows. In Vietnam, where foreign relief organizations are not permitted to run their own programs, Church World Service channels its money through groups effectively controlled by the communist government. In Cambodia, under Vietnamese occupation and with similar restrictions, the agency has devised a different solution. It pays for a team of five agricultural technicians from other Soviet-bloc nations. Four of these are Cubans, recruited through the Ecumenical Council of Cuba, a group that lavishes praise upon and enjoys the favor of the Castro regime. In effect, therefore, CWS is using church dollars to underwrite a gesture that will be seen as "fraternal assistance" between communist regimes.

There are indisputably many excellent works of Christian compassion done through Church World Service. But there are also deep problems: a shrinking base of support, high overhead costs, and an unwise and unwarranted political bias. These problems will not be solved simply by a divorce from the NCC. Church World Service, like the council itself, has a long road to reform.

-- AFW

Religious Liberty Alert

Romania: In the Eyes of the World

Romania's reputation in the international community may finally have caught up with reality about a year ago. The reality there for years has been bulldozed churches, Bibles converted into toilet paper, and nearly zero tolerance for priests and pastors who openly disagree with government policies. In the eyes of the world, however, Romania's reputation did not begin to reflect this repression until the regime's abuses were spotlighted in a campaign to cut off its "Most-Favored Nation" (MFN) trading status with the United States.

The communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu finally renounced MFN status rather than have Congress revoke it. Ceausescu's move did not unleash new religious and political persecution, but neither has the persecution abated. One year after the West condemned the large-scale destruction of churches, the practice continues. Father Gheorghe Calciu, an Orthodox priest jailed for more than twenty years until he emigrated in 1985, reported the demolition last month of churches and entire villages surrounding Bucharest.

Ceausescu has a grand scheme for erasing nearly 8,000 villages off the map of Romania. Their inhabitants are to be forced into new "agro-industrial complexes." Not only have western countries criticized this plan, but even Romania's communist neighbor, Hungary, has condemned it. Thousands of ethnic Hungarians in Romania have fled across the border to Hungary to escape the forced resettlement. Leaders of the mostly-Hungarian Reformed Church of Romania took a bold step by publicly protesting the scheme.

Fr. Calciu is now priest of a small Romanian Orthodox church in Virginia. He still works on behalf of his brethren by doing religious broadcasts on Radio Free Europe, publicizing appeals from persecuted Romanian believers, and raising money for Romanian refugees. However, there is little that he can do now to loosen the grip of the regime inside Romania.

The Orthodox hierarchy there, which defrocked Fr. Calciu when the state imprisoned him, remains unwilling to confront the authorities on behalf of its flock. Hope is found, Father Calciu says, in the fact that many priests still preach the Word of God, and that 16 to 18 million of Romania's 23 million citizens belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Problems which face Romania's Protestant churches are similar. Efforts to remodel or enlarge churches to accommodate bulging congregations have been rebuffed harshly. The Pentecostal church in Bistrita has been repeatedly denied permission to expand. After the congregation undertook some repairs on its own, the state threatened to send in its bulldozers. Church members have occupied the building to prevent demolition and signed a protest petition. The national Pentecostal leadership, though, has been reluctant to speak up.

Former religious dissenters like Father Calciu have few heirs at the moment inside Romania. One of the most urgent cases of religious persecution involves Nestor-Corneliu Popescu, a prisoner in a psychiatric hospital in Romania since mid-1987. Popescu is locked up, according to the court decision, because "he made Baptist religious propaganda and at the same time denigrated the cultural policy of the communist party and government."

Popescu's condition is worsening due to forced drug treatments. The address of the hospital where he is being held:

Spitalul de Psihiatrie
Poiana Mare, Jud. Dolj
ROMANIA

You may write to lend encouragement to his wife, Mihaela, who is presently staging a "house-protest":

Mihaela Popescu
Str. Viitor, Nr. 24
Sector 2, Bucharest, ROMANIA

— J. Randall Tift

Mr. Tift is Legislative Assistant for Foreign Affairs to Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA).

Religion & Democracy

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Address Correction Requested