

Cathy CHANG

# How can a WCC Conference Create an Environment for Dialogue?

*On May 9–16, 2005, I traveled to Athens, Greece, to attend the World Council of Churches (WCC) Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). This conference's theme was "Come, Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile! Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities."*

## Creating an Environment for Dialogue

Our Presbyterian Church (USA) delegation also included Rev. Dr. Marian McCLURE, a commissioner with the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME); Bethany BORAK, Rev. Raafat GIRGIS, Rev. Unzu LEE, and Rev. Clint McCOY.

In preparation for this conference, I met with Professor Darrell GUDER several days before the event. In our conversation, he asked me about my mission experience. I highlighted some of my short-term mission experience, mostly sponsored by parachurch organizations or denominations other than the PC(USA).

My experience as a young adult volunteer in Cairo, Egypt, in 2002 and 2003, was my first taste of "doing" mission in ecumenical partnership. I also told him about the opportunity to meet and dialogue with other "young missiologists" when I participated in a Young Missiologist Consultation in Rome, Italy, during January 2005.

An internal dialogue had already begun with me, as I was thinking about my diverse past mission experiences. On a grander scale, it seemed that this Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) also wanted to create an environment of dialogue among Christians of various traditions.

My main question became, "How will the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) create an environment for such dialogue to occur?" Based on my insights and reflections about this consultation and conference, I will attempt to answer this question.

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### Reality Check Among Missiologists

I partially answered this question as I thought about the Young Missiologist Consultation in Rome in 2005. This consultation was designed to invite young people to prepare for the Athens conference. We divided into different groups to discuss our ideas about pneumatology, the healing ministry in churches, reconciliation, and dialogue.

I joined the group that discussed *dialogue* in such forms as interdenominational and interreligious dialogue. Our group consisted of Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical–Lutheran and Pentecostal participants. As much as I appreciated the experience within my small group, I was also struck by my other colleagues' comments.

During the introduction of our consultation, I remember Stephen, a Nigerian pastor, shared his concerns about what it means to be a “young missiologist.” He expressed that a typical thirty-year-old from a developing country might not be at the same place in her or his education as someone from the Western world. In effect, some students might not have this opportunity to participate because they did not meet specific age criteria.

Some colleagues also made pointed statements during the closing remarks of our consultation. These comments provided me with a good “reality check” on the challenges of ecumenism. Marcos, a pastor from Peru, talked about the difficulties of expressing himself in English and not feeling free to speak his mind in Spanish.

Peter, a U.S. seminarian, observed that there were five United States Presbyterian participants but none from Africa, which has by far the strongest Presbyterian and Reformed presence. Ulrike, a German woman now teaching in Peru, was frustrated by the demographics of our consultation: we were not representative enough of the remarkable shift of Christianity away from the North.

### Ecumenical Fellowship

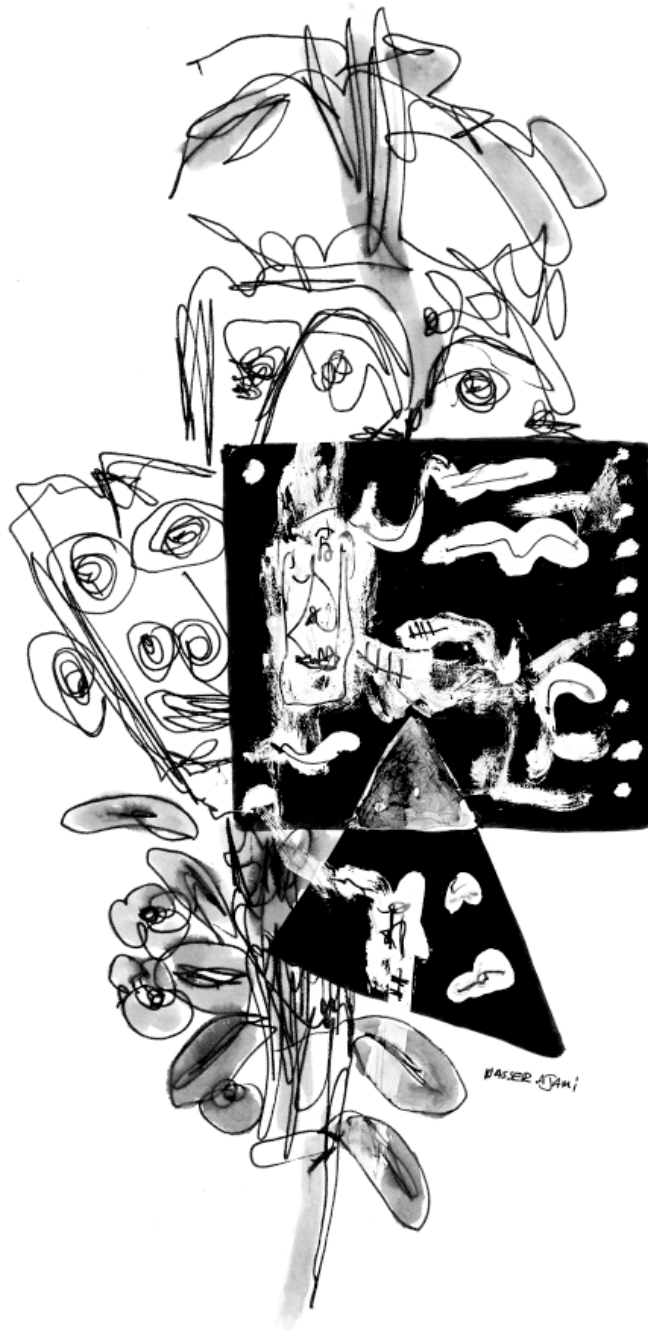
Attending this Young Missiologist Consultation in Rome had, in fact, prepared me for this Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). As much as I felt prepared, I sensed that I would experience and observe even greater joys, insights, and challenges of ecumenism in Athens.

Some of these greater joys came in the form of ecumenical fellowship. Each morning after breakfast and at the close of each day, I led a home group. In the morning, we read together through Bible passages in the *Lectio Divina* style.

When we studied Ezekiel 37, I remember the words of Tobias, my Swiss German colleague who is a prison chaplain in Hong Kong. He talked about how this passage reminded him of “baai shan.” This prison jargon or colloquial expression for prison visit means to worship one's ancestors. He further explained: “It is the feeling that that the prison visitor is going to visit somebody who is already in the grave, a dead body.”

Another form of fellowship came in the opportunity to worship together in song. Different participants at the conference took their turns in worship leadership, so I learned songs in other languages and other liturgies.

We learned Pentecostal praise songs and even a Greek Orthodox liturgical hymn



proclaiming *Christos Anesti* (Greek for “Christ is Risen”). In addition to reading Scripture and singing together, there was plenty of opportunity to learn through the plenary speakers and Synæxis (Greek for “gathering of people,” oftentimes used as they gather around a selected theme or issue) discussions.

### **Listening and Healing**

Each day focused on a theme such as “Come, Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile!”; “Called in Christ to Be Healing and Reconciling Communities”; “Mission and Violence”; “Healing”; and “Reconciliation.”

At the conclusion of the conference, “listeners” presented their observations to all the conference participants. Interestingly enough, I also learned a lot from the listeners’ observations. Two of the listeners particularly caught my attention. Professor Nam-Soon KANG talked about the use of language as a means of power, especially when it is used in a Eurocentric and androcentric way.

Kwabena ASAMOAH-GYADU spoke directly about his African contextual reality, but also with a deep concern for the future of ecumenism. While discussing what it would be like to partake in Holy Communion across different Christian traditions, he exclaimed: “How can we eat secular food together and not take the Eucharist together?”

### **Challenges of Age and Representation**

As much as I experienced the joys of ecumenical fellowship, there were also challenges and tensions at this conference. From the moment that I checked into the registration area, I knew something set me apart from the other conference participants. I was at least five years older than some of the stewards who had attended the Youth Conference before this conference. It also appeared that I was twenty years younger than the average age of a conference participant.

As I looked around at the other attendees, I saw many people who appeared to be more like my seminary professors or my denomination’s ecumenical and mission program administrators. In age I was closer to being youth delegate or steward. I longed for many more young adults who could consider themselves as *delegates* of a WCC member church or affiliated body.”

In our home group, I had hoped for more diversity, since initially our group consisted mostly of men from either North America or Western Europe. Eventually our group gained Janet, another woman from Canada, but we still were not representative at all of the conference participants.

### **Breakaway Protesters**

Another source of tension came from outside of the confines of the retreat center. Since this conference was the first one to be hosted predominantly in an Orthodox context, I was interested to learn what kind of reaction that would cause. A few yards away from our worship tent, I saw and heard for myself what kind of reaction. After our conference kicked off, a “breakaway” faction of the Greek Orthodox church protested the conference.

Soon after we learned how to sing *Christos Anesti*, we participants also heard strains of the same liturgy at the protest. By the fourth day of our conference, our conference daily newspaper published the following statement: “The conference leadership entirely respects their right to hold different views, but also upholds the right of participants to peace and tolerance.”

It was interesting to observe the protest as well as the various reactions of conference participants. Some expressed the desire to worship together, while others ignored the protesters. Here we were at the conference, bringing together Christians of various traditions. I could not help but wonder what dialogue would look like if we had extended an invitation to dialogue with this “breakaway” faction.

### Letter from Athens

One of the greater challenges became more apparent in the final plenary session of the conference. Designated writers presented a “Letter from Athens” that would be sent to the churches and respective bodies of the conference participants.

Unlike previous conferences, this letter of the designated writers replaced the statements of delegates from member churches of the WCC. After reading this letter, the conference participants volunteered their feedback about this letter.

During the whole week, the framework of this conference was conducive to listening to each other and dialoguing with one another. In the few hours remaining, we worked through some revisions of this letter. In a sense, we shifted gears from listening to one another, to ensuring that the letter sounded “just right.”

Factions formed between those who wished to work on something then and there, and those who wanted to defer the letter-writing to the CWME commissioners who were to meet for several days after this conference.

In the end, we deferred to the commissioners. As much as I appreciated the efforts of the designated excellent writers and commissioners to draft and revise our letter, I wished and sensed among other conference participants a need for a better framework in which to provide feedback for this letter.

For this unique learning opportunity to experience the joys and challenges of ecumenism, I am grateful for the opportunity to attend the World Council of Churches (WCC) Young Missiologist Consultation in Rome, Italy.

I am also thankful that I attended and participated in the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) in Athens, Greece. By allowing me to share some of my insights and observations, now I have written my own “Letter from Athens.”

### **Cathy CHANG: Comment est ce qu'une Conférence du COE peut elle Créer un Environnement pour le Dialogue?**

Dans sa préparation pour sa première COE CME, l'auteur réfléchit sur son expérience dans une organisation dénominationnelle conservatrice, aussi bien que de son expérience issue du dialogue avec des collègues au cours de la consultation des jeunes Missiologues du COE. La question soulevée est: comment la CME créera un environnement pour le dialogue? En réponse à cette question, l'article peint quelques joies et défis de l'œcuménisme, comme perçu lors de la conférence missionnaire mondiale du COE tenu à Athènes, Grèce. Au delà des observations générales, quelques réactions et recommandations spécifiques sont formulées à propos de la conférence, et spécialement en réponse à les plénières de fin qui ont emmené l'auteur à questionner le cadre de travail dans lequel nous avons produit notre rapport final sous forme d'une lettre. D'autres critiques sont formulées au niveau de la participation des jeunes adultes, comme il apparaissait que la conférence était dirigée vers les professeurs et les administrateurs d'Eglises. Dans l'ensemble, cependant, l'auteur rapporte une expérience positive.

### **Cathy CHANG: ¿Cómo Puede una Conferencia CMI Crear un Ambiente para el Dialogo?**

En la preparación para su primera CMI CWME, la autora reflexiona sobre sus experiencias la para-iglesia conservadora y las organizaciones sectarias, así como sobre su reciente experiencia de dialogo con colegas en una junta CMI missiologista. Se hace la pregunta: "¿Cómo puede el CWME crear un ambiente para el dialogo?" En respuesta a esta pregunta, el artículo muestra algunas alegrías y retos del ecumenismo, como percepción a través de la CMI CWME celebrada en Atenas, Grecia. Más allá de observaciones generales, se formulan algunas recomendaciones y reacciones específicas acerca de la conferencia, especialmente en respuesta a las sesiones plenarias finales, las cuales hicieron que la autora se cuestionara el marco en que hicimos el reporte final en forma de carta. Otra crítica a la participación de jóvenes adultos se eleva, cuando parece que la conferencia esa dirigida a profesores y administradores de iglesias. Sin embargo, por encima de todo, la autora refiere una experiencia positiva.