

Chapter 153

Global Reach and Global Agenda: The World Council of Churches

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153.1 Introduction

Today historians interpret the twentieth century as an age of extreme violence, wars, destruction, ideologies and dictatorships. At the same time, it opened new forms of transnational communication, set up global organizations and networks, and connected at the same time the local to the universal. Just as secular history, the history of Christianity was embedded between these two extremes of the short twentieth century (Lehmann 2012; Kunter and Schjørring 2008). As a result of these developments Christian transnational cooperation as well as interdenominational cooperation increased, amounting to the heyday of the Ecumenical movement.

Notwithstanding the schism and splits that have been a part of Christian history since its onset, the Great Schism of 1045 between the Eastern and the Western Church became a crucial symbol for a divided church, just as the Reformation in the sixteenth century that finally resulted in a new theological doctrine and the separation of Protestantism from the Roman Catholic Church. Although in reality these different Christian denominations and churches face each other irreconcilably, they are united by the shared belief that one day all these separations will be overcome and all Christians will be one in Christ, as it is written in John 17:21. Contemporaries of the Ancient World called this vision of a worldwide Christian community *oikumene*, after the Greek word *oikos* which referred to the whole inhabited world on earth.

Initially promoted by young Protestant men in Europe and North America, the idea of a worldwide Christian community grew since the middle of the nineteenth century and gave birth to several new ecumenical networks and organizations. The World Council of Churches (WCC) consisting of Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox, emerged from these organizations. It was founded in 1948 in Amsterdam

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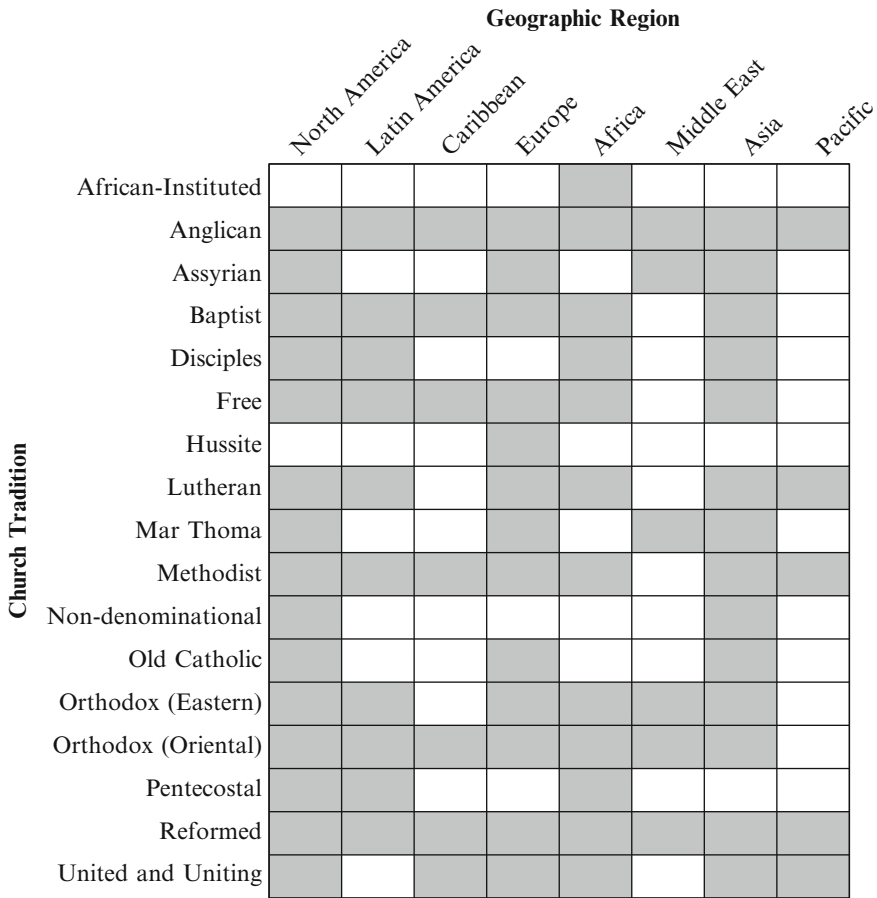


Fig. 153.1 Church tradition and geographic regions of members of the World Council of Churches (Source: World Council of Churches, used with permission)

and has been located in Geneva, Switzerland ever since. During the postwar period, this Christian organization developed into the most influential international church board besides the Roman Catholic Church. But while the Vatican is an independent state under international law, the WCC has not so much possibilities to influence international politics because it is just a transnational umbrella association (Rittberger and Zangl 2003). Despite the ongoing, and often justified, criticisms about the theology and policy of the WCC, it is still the only non-Catholic Christian organization with a worldwide, interdenominational membership (Kunter 2012; Richter 2011; Bremer 2003; Greschat 2000; Joppien 2000; Besier et al. 1999). With 349 member churches in more than 140 countries on all six continents, the WCC today represents more 572 million Christians. More than a quarter of the member churches (132 million) are from Africa, nearly the half (287 million) from Europe, and a fifth (62, 6 million) from Asia¹ (Figs. 153.1 and 153.2). Based on the assumption

¹ Data from 2006, see WCC (Ed.) (2006). Zeugnis – Einheit – Dienst. Geneva: WCC Publications.

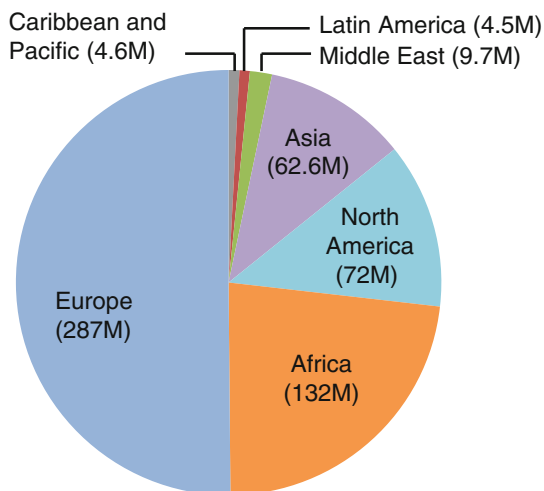


Fig. 153.2 Regional percentage of the 572 million members of the World Council of Churches (Source: World Council of Churches, used with permission)

that this worldwide scope of the WCC goes back to the 1960s and early 1970s and went hand in hand with decolonization and the rise of the organizations such as the United Nations, this article explores three sides of this ecumenical transformation. First it looks back on the forerunners of the WCC and the period of the first globalization; second it discusses when and in which way the WCC adopted and represented the topics and policies of international organizations such as the United Nations, and third it shows how the WCC has been transformed from a formerly Western organization into a global community and also the conflicts and tensions that this transformation has caused.

While the majority of studies on the history of WCC are written from a very European or Western perspective this chapter explores the WCC from a global historical perspective. Using new approaches of the study of Global History, the term “Globalization” is applied to this historical process. Hence, the WCC in the “long sixties” achieved not only global structures and global members, but also a global consciousness. This framework was formed by the thought that all people are living in one world – and therefore responsible for each other and everybody’s conditions of life. This view implied, according to Roland Robertson (Robertson 1992), the synchrony between the global and the local. It will be shown that especially in the 1960s and 1970s the WCC and its conferences conferences and programs formed the global platform which interacted directly with its local bases, viz, the parishes and local communities of their member churches.

153.2 Beginnings of the Ecumenical Movement and the First Phase of Globalization

The origins of the Ecumenical movement can be traced back into the middle of the nineteenth century when English and the American revivalism called for a renewed Christendom. Inspired young men sought to cross national boundaries and to win people all over the world for Christianity. Aiming for conversion and mission in the inner city especially, they believed in the decision of the individual for Christ as their personal savior. Their vision was a movement for Christ, a worldwide community that encouraged the incorporation of Christ in the daily practical and spiritual lives of its members. The *Young Men's Christian Association* (YMCA) was one of the first of these initiatives. It was founded in 1844 and focused on young men in English towns and cities. The YMCA turned out to be the first transnational ecumenical movement (Mjagkij 2003; Davidann 1998; Xing 1996). Within a short time, it spread from Great Britain to Australia, India, Japan, China and to the United States as well as into other countries of Europe including Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Belgium and France. The first world conference of the YMCA took place in Paris in 1855. With its mission statement and its conference style of delegates from national YMCA groups, it set a standard for all later ecumenical movements and bodies. The *Young Women's Christian Association* (YWCA), the corresponding organization aiming at women, soon spread to Europe, to the United States, Japan, China and India. The great missionary dedication of the YMCA and the YMCA inspired the foundation of other Christian youth movements. Among those was the World Student Christian Federation (WCSF, founded in 1895) which became another forerunner of the Protestant ecumenical movement (Selles 2011; Evans 2003; Lehtonen 1998; Potter and Wieser 1996). Organized in the same way as the YMCA, it shared at first the idea of evangelization and the personal decision for Christ, but then stepped outside of the conservative piety of the revival tradition and became much more liberal and modern. For example, many American members joined the Social Gospel, a socially progressive leftist movement. Women were also allowed to become members of the WCSF. From 1895 onwards John R. Mott (1865–1955), a famous Methodist preacher from the United States, and Clara Ruth Rouse (1872–1956), a former English missionary in India, led the WCSF for more than 20 years. During this period the WCSF grew into a real international ecumenical movement, with more than 3,000 groups with 300,000 members worldwide in the 1920s. The WCSF formed the base from which future leading figures of the WCC like the general secretaries Willem Visser't Hooft from the Netherlands or Philipp Potter from the Caribbean received their theological and cultural imprint.

The YMCA and WCSF developed into the main transnational actors during this first period of global ecumenical movements. Many of their members were also delegates at the first World Mission Conference, held from June 14–23, 1910 in Edinburgh in Scotland. It was the biggest ecumenical church gathering at that time, with 1,400 representatives coming from 159 different Protestant Missionary Societies worldwide (Kunter 2011; Stanley 2009; Hogg 1952; Gairdner 1910). Mott summarized the conference as “The most notable gathering in the worldwide

expansion of Christianity ever held, not only in missionary annals, but in all Christian annals” (Hopkins 1979: 342). Its vision was a renewed and dynamic, steadily growing Christendom that finds its way from the “West” into the rest of the world.

Fuelled by the great optimism of the new century, the quote “The evangelization of the world in this generation” by conference chairman and later Peace Nobel prize winner John R. Mott soon became an aphorism of the new aspiration towards a globally interlinked Christendom.² But despite this global motto, the Edinburgh conference was primarily an event of the Protestant West. Only 17 of the 1,400 participants came from countries of the so-called Third World, even if the many international working-places of the participants suggested a highly global representation of World Protestantism. Paternalistic ideas of mission and the expansion of the Western culture into the Non-Western world dominated the discussions.

Nevertheless, the Edinburgh conference became a milestone in ecumenical history that led to the development of new international friendships and networks.

153.3 The Moral, Theological and Political Foundation of the WCC

The First World War severed many of these new connections. A new start was made in 1938 in Utrecht in the Netherlands. Members of the ecumenical groups “Faith and Order” and “Life and Work” decided to establish the World Council of Churches (WCC) with its headquarter in Geneva as an international institution for all Protestant churches. However, any concrete plans to realize this institution were stopped by the outbreak of World War II. Yet, there was an inner circle around future General secretary of the WCC Willem Visser’t Hooft (1900–1985) who were still in operation, helping Jews and other refugees, and passing secret information from the German resistance to the Allies.

After the war in 1946, a number of prominent Anglo-American members of the WCC and the International Missionary Council founded the Commission of Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) (Nurser 2005; Greschat 1998; Nolde 1974; Fey 1968). A leading figure of this commission was John Forster Dulles, the later United States Secretary of State. He had already chaired the “Commission to Study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace during Wartimes” in the 1940s which had tried to promote ideas of an international world order, decolonization, disarmament and democracy during the war. The CCIA continued in this spirit this policy, but focused particularly on human rights and religious liberty. Its members maintained close relations with high ranking politicians and followed carefully the work of the United Nations from its beginning. They also participated in the drafting stage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With their statement on religious liberty of 1947, the CCIA contributed the final version of Article 18 on

²It was originally the title of Mott’s bestselling book: Mott, John R. (1900). *The evangelization of the world in this generation*. New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions.

freedom of thought, conscience and religion that was included in the final version of the Human Rights Declaration from 10th December 1948.

The first meeting of the WCC in autumn 1948 in Amsterdam was based in many ways on the moral and political groundwork of the UN (WCC 1949; t’Hooft 1982). Many delegates were further inspired by the thoughts presented by Scottish missionary Joseph H. Oldham and Swiss theologian Karl Barth on the role of the church in a world in disorder. These two directions resulted in the theological and socio-ethical concept of a responsible society. This concept stressed the Christian responsibility towards God and Men in a free society, appreciated the role of the UN, and demanded the implementation of the universal human rights, thus setting the course for a global political engagement of the churches – although, like in Edinburgh 30 years before, the founding members in Amsterdam came largely from North America and Western Europe. Only 30 out of the 147 member churches were from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

But while the WCC was still dominated by Western ideas and staff, it endeavored to reduce slowly its political activities in postwar Europe. The close relationship between the WCC, the CCIA and the UN was strengthened when the UN accredited the CCIA as one of the first NGOs (Kunter 2002) (Fig. 153.3). This gave the WCC



Fig. 153.3 CCIA staff on United Nations Balcony D (Photo from World Council of Churches, used with permission)

access to more information, influence and cooperation within other organizations of the UN like the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency (UNICEF). In order to coordinate its work and to communicate more effectively with the UN, the CCIA maintained offices in New York, Geneva, London and Paris. Today, only two of those offices still exist: the headquarters in Geneva and the office in New York, which was renamed CCIA/WCC United Nations Headquarter Liaison Office in 1960. All these connections provided incentives for the practical work of the WCC and the CCIA. Just as during World War II, international refugee work soon emerged as one of the central areas of the humanitarian work of the churches. In 1949, the CCIA, troubled by the situation of the Palestinian refugees after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, inquired about their future in the UN General Assembly and called for a broader and more comprehensive approach to the refugee problem which was not only limited to European refugees and displaced persons (DPs). Its intervention was successful. After the foundation of the UNHCR in 1951, the WCC and the Lutheran World Federation succeeded in procuring more funding for UN refugee work and in improving the international standards for those working with refugees.

153.4 The Second Phase of Globalization: Decolonization and De-Westernization

Decolonization, the Cold War, and the growing wealth of the West ended the postwar period. From the 1950s to the middle of the 1970s a new period of stability started, which marked at the same time a period of tension and dynamic changes that had an impact on politics and society worldwide, the "Golden Age" as Eric Hobsbawm labeled these years with a particular focus on the Western hemisphere. As for Christian churches, this period posed a double challenge. On the one hand they had to face pluralism, the growing secularization and the loss of Christian tradition and piety in Europe and partly in North America. On the other hand, the growing number of countries in the Third World³ led to a change in the self-conception of the WCC as a truly ecumenical organization (Kunter and Schilling 2013). New and independent Christian churches had been formed in countries of Africa and Asia. They demanded for themselves the same privileges within the WCC as the old colonial churches, which were still frequently associated with the Western missionary churches. As a result of these tensions the World Missionary Conference in Ghana 1958 decided to abolish all distinctions between "old" and "young" churches (Orchard 1959). Yet, equality of the "young" churches of the South within the ecumenical movement became one of the crucial issues in international ecumenical meetings.

³The term Third World is here used as a historical term of the contemporaries and the sources. It referred mostly to the developing countries in Africa and Asia. In the ecumenical movement it also included Latin America.

It was at this peak of decolonization when the third General Assembly of the WCC convened in 1961, just one year after 17 former African colonies had gained their independence in what has been called the “African Year” 1960 (Kalter 2010). For the first time in the history of the WCC, the assembly did not take place in Europe or North America, but in one of the starting points of decolonization, viz., in the Indian capital New Delhi (t’Hooft 1962). The atmosphere was one of change and new beginnings, evidenced in the large number of more than 1,000 participants and great media interest. Only a few of the “great old men” (t’Hooft 1973) who had given shape to the ecumenical movement before World War II were present in New Delhi. None of them was in the leadership, except the general secretary Visser’t Hooft, representing now the older generation. Another indication of the deep transformation within the WCC was the growing number of member churches from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Over time, their proportion increased from 37 % at the second general assembly in Evanston in 1954 to 54 % at the fourth general assembly in Nairobi in 1975 (Kunter and Schilling 2014). In part, these changes were due to the “Rapid Social Change Program” that was established after the second general assembly of the WCC that was held at the same time as the Third World Conference in Bandung. The program was intended to devote more attention to the young churches and their socio-political challenges (Albrecht 1961). Together with two other important developments, the program paved the way for a wider geographical and interdenominational expansion of the WCC. The first of these two developments was to integrate the International Missionary Council, which was an independent organization until then, into the WCC. Behind this step stood a new concept of mission, as the term could not be understood anymore to describe the traditional European missionary movements, but as mission coming from and going to all six continents (Müller-Krüger 1964). On the other hand, the integration of 23 churches as new members was an important agenda item. Among these, there were eleven new churches from Africa, five from Asia, and three from Latin America and the Caribbean.⁴ Yet, the most controversial matter in the media was the entry into the WCC of the Russian Orthodox Church and of three other Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe. The topic of debate was in how far the WCC might be instrumentalized by Moscow. But despite the criticism that the membership of the Russian Orthodox Church in the WCC provoked, its inclusion marked not only a geographical, but also an interdenominational expansion of the WCC (Fig. 153.4).

One of the new voices representing the Third World in New Delhi was the Indian theologian Madathilparampil Mammen (M. M.) Thomas. He came from a Protestant-Orthodox Indian church, had been in contact with the ecumenical movement via the Indian World Student Christian Federation and was the only representative of the Third World who had already participated in the preparations for the Amsterdam assembly (Thomas 1990). His biography personified the new revolutionary hopes for global transformation of Christianity that the ecumenical movement meant for

⁴The new member churches are listed in Visser ’t Hooft (Ed.) (1962). Neu-Delhi 1961. Dokumentarbericht über die Dritte Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen. Stuttgart: Evangelischer Missionsverlag, 16–17.



Fig. 153.4 Presidents of the World Council of Churches, 1961 (Photo from World Council of Churches, used with permission)

many Christians: He came from the Indian independence movement, was connected with Mahatma Gandhi and was for, a while, was a member of the communist party. Nevertheless he was a devoted intellectual Christian, convinced that Christians had to fight for good conditions for a humane life. Thomas and other speakers saw the assembly in New Delhi as a turning point in the ecumenical history, or, as he later wrote: “New Delhi 1961 was the Assembly which began the conversion of the WCC from being a movement largely of West European Protestant churches to being a truly *world* movement” (Thomas 1990: 252).

153.5 De-Westernization of the WCC

After the New Delhi assembly, the World Conference for Church and Society held in Geneva in 1966 set another milestone. Already half of the 450 participants came from countries of the Third World. They addressed topics that started to change the ecumenical discourse. For example, controversial discussions arose around the “theology of revolution” and the “Program to Combat Racism” (PCR) that was implemented in 1969. Its aim was to support different liberation movements, especially in Southern Africa by providing humanitarian help. Yet, there was a dissent between the different member churches of the WCC about the extent of this support and who was going to steer it.

However, the election of the new third General Secretary of the WCC in 1972 received much more publicity than the program to combat racism. 51-year-old Methodist Philip A. Potter came from the Caribbean island Dominica, which was at

that time still under British colonial rule and became the first non-white General Secretary after the Dutch Willem A. Visser't Hooft and the U.S.-American Eugene Carson Blake (Jagessar 1997). As Potter was considered a symbol that equality of the Third World churches had now been achieved, his election was associated with tremendous hopes for a wide renewal and of inner reforms as well as the ecumenical movement. But Potter's ecumenical career was not only a sign that the Western hemisphere had lost its hold on the South, but also showed that he was neither an ecumenical outsider nor a newcomer, but rather an old stager (Kunter 2011). With support from both former General Secretaries, he had gone through all the important stages that qualified him for an international leadership position. Starting with the Christian World Federation, he had been youth speaker at the WCC General Assemblies in Amsterdam (1948) and Evanston (1954). At the age of 33, he moved to Geneva in 1954, where he worked in the youth department of the WCC and between 1958 and 1961 as its director. After a couple of years at the Methodist Missionary Society in London he returned to Geneva in 1967 as director of the new commission for World Mission and Evangelism, the former International Missionary Council. In this position Philip Potter was also responsible for the organization of the 9th World Mission Conference, which took place from 20th December 1972 to 13th January 1973 in Bangkok, Thailand (Potter 1973).

More than any other conference that had preceded it, this ecumenical meeting saw the final abolishment of the Western understanding of mission that was a direct result of the meeting in Edinburgh in 1910. The main themes of the Bangkok conference were today's understanding of mission and salvation; and more than 300 participants from 69 countries came together to explore this theme (Kunter and Schilling 2014; Kunter 2011). The department for World Mission and Evangelism under Potter endeavored to set up a constructive, communicative atmosphere that ensured that the young churches felt included. They, therefore, decided to deviate from the structure that was typically considered a Western style with papers, lectures and discussions of experts that normally excluded other styles of cultural expressions. Instead, the WCC prepared a conference program that gave more room to discussions and personal talks in small groups. Long plenary speeches of Western participants were avoided and only voices from the South should be heard in the plenary. Several highly emotional appeals were presented to the participants, for example by the former Indonesian independence fighter and church leader T.B. Simatupang who proclaimed the end of the four hundred era years of dominance of Western Culture und Western Church. This leitmotif dominated the whole conference. Also, several theological concepts underwent a reinterpretation: "Salvation" was now seen as liberation from unjust political and social situations, "Mission" as an inner renewal of the churches and their ecumenical relations. The old idea of mission that had been born in 1910 – that mission started from the West and would then change into a worldwide Mission – was dead.

Many European and North American Protestants saw the World Mission Conference of Bangkok as a fundamental watershed in the history of ecumenism (Kunter and Schilling 2014; Kunter 2011). Nearly all national newspapers reported details about the missionary conference. The Schweizer Tageblatt wrote for example



Fig. 153.5 World Conference on Salvation Today, Bangkok, 1973 (Right: P. Potter) (Photo from World Council of Churches, used with permission)

“Das kopfnickende Negerlein ist tot“ (“*the headnodding little negroe is dead*”) and the German newspaper “Die Zeit” captioned: “Das Heil der Heiden – am Ende abendländisch-christlicher Vorherrschaft” (“*Salvation of the Heath – at the End of occidental-christian Hegemony*”) (WCC 272.018). Conservative and evangelical Protestants from Germany and the United States criticized the new ecumenical consensus and the “Humanization” of the Gospel. The end of the Western missionary concept would be the total surrender of the Christian belief in the future, they claimed (Beyerhaus 1973). Evangelical groups who former joined the International Missionary Council consequently left the WCC in the aftermath (Fig. 153.5).

But the De-Westernization of the WCC was not only a matter of theology and geography. When a member of the East German Protestant Churches (GDR) summarized Bangkok with the words: “Salvation is not coming from the West” Adler (1973) it became clear that the North-south conflict was embedded into the Cold War and the antagonism between East and West too.

153.6 Politicized Issues: Racism and Human Rights

Against this background during the 1960s and 1970s new alliances developed between the First, Second and Third World within the WCC. They went together with new theological ideas and political activities. Anti-colonialism, anti-racism, socialism and the theology of liberation replaced in many aspects the concept of the responsible society and the traditional anticommunism of the WCC, which was

focused mainly on Eastern Europe. Here the contribution of leftwing Protestantism of Latin America was remarkable (Schilling 2013) as the WCC wanted to be politically and economically independent from the United States and pleaded for democratic socialism which broke off the issue of socialism out of the East-west-Conflict in Europe. Similarly the liberal idea of human rights underwent a change. For the general assembly of the WCC in 1968 in Uppsala in Sweden racial discrimination became now the top priority of any political activity in the ecumenical movement (Godall 1968). Hence, the WCC implemented after Uppsala the *Programme to Combat Racism* (PCR) (Adler 1974). It later was implemented as a steady part of the WCC's structure. Its aim was to identify and establish ecumenical policies and programs that would substantially contribute to the liberation of victims of racism. Special attention was paid to white racism and on the struggle against institutional racism, because they were based on social, economic and political power structures. A new approach in the ecumenical human rights discourse came up (Albers 2014). The collective human rights of all men (*sic.*) were stressed in opposite to the classical Western individual human rights. That also meant the right to enable people to liberate themselves out of unjust structures – in a pinch with violence.

From now on social and human rights stood in the center of the ecumenical policy (Kunter 2000). Most prominent it included the support for the Anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa from up the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s. But the change towards a more global and integrative approach of human rights had its problems too. It brought on the one hand more alliances with representatives of the churches in the socialist countries of Middle and Eastern Europe, especially with those who were loyal to their state and the communist ideology. Stressing social and human rights therefore soon became a highly politicized matter of the Cold War. In many cases there was opposition to Western liberal individual rights and polarized discussions and representatives. Or to state it more simply: Being against racism and apartheid was left, accusing human rights violations in Eastern Europe was right.

On the other hand this ecumenical globalization of the human right discourse followed similar developments on the international level, especially in the UN. Less controversial were the changes in the ecumenical efforts on behalf of education, although it followed in the same way the demands of the Third World representatives. A new office for education was set up, prominently represented with the Brazil educator Paulo Freire and his “Paedagogy of the Oppressed” (Strümpfel 2010). And another important arena of WCC's work was deeply influenced by the challenges through the Third World, viz., humanitarian help. Instead of the old idea of paternalistic “diaconical help” the slogan was now: “Justice, not charity” (Hookway et al. 2002).

153.7 Conclusions

Throughout the “long sixties” the WCC would run through a phase of changes and challenges. During this decade the WCC transformed from a mainly Anglo-American network to a modern, non-governmental international organization.

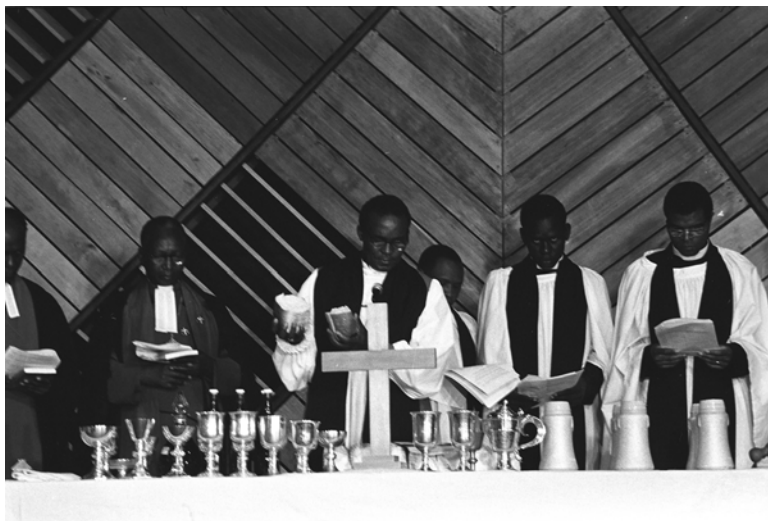


Fig. 153.6 Eucharistic celebration with United Liturgy for East Africa, 1975 (Photo from World Council of Churches, used with permission)

Voices of the younger churches in Asia and Africa had more participation. While the North-south conflict came into the center, the East-west conflict moved to the periphery of the ecumenical debates. This globalization of the WCC had four elements: first the denominational extension – to Protestants and Anglicans came also Orthodox and Pentecostals (Fig. 153.6); second, the geographical expansion from West and North to East and South; third, the integration of more secular analysis and, fourth, and last but not least, the participation of laypeople, especially women and young people.

The WCC functioned as a catalyst, because it transported global issues and trends into its worldwide membership. At the same time the challenges of the globalization led to a renewal of its structures, policies and mentalities under the paradigm of globalization.

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