

General Assembly, Portland, 1967

(Report by R. Winter to Fraternal Workers in Guatemala)

Quietly and politely nearly a thousand elders, ministers and agency personnel flooded into town, filtered into a dozen hotels or so, and then flocked to the huge covered Coliseum which was the focus of the General Assembly. What a group; Educated, dedicated, concerned churchmen all, efficiently organized into a truly amazing whirl of inter-locking sessions and sub-groups, here was a high-level but human, middle-class Christianity officially at work, endeavoring sincerely to do the will of God.

I cannot report in detail on everything--it was very much like a monstrous Guatemalan Synod meeting in which everything the various departments do comes up for review. A lot is routine. I will try to pull out a few things you might not have been able to predict.;

PRE-ASSEMBLY: EVANGELISM CONFERENCE

1. A brilliant, shocking, informative Berkeley-Free-Speech-Movement leader held us all spellbound. Some "near-quotes: On Bureaucracy: "All are now opposed, whether it is Goldwater or Wallace, the New Left or Reagan." On Work and Leisure: "Due to the very success of the older generation, the whip of necessity doesn't hit us; work is neither a threat nor does it bring rewards that are worth it." On Country and Government: "On one issue all students are united, Hippies, New Left, Radicals, etc.--the draft." On Church: "We assume it is an institution like all others, that will defend itself first and only offer bureaucratically-couched small reforms instead of the basic reforms that are necessary."

2. Then a Campus Crusade leader came on. His presentation was so drab and traditional that I actually slept through the greater part of his talk. But no denying his humility and sincerity; a fine fellow. Too bad he wasn't asked about CCC's unusual methods rather than its relatively traditional message.

3. Robert McAfee Brown had the popular, evening meeting address and spoke in a masterful way of the diaspora posture of the church in relation to the world, the church is not to save itself but to save society, and this by concern for the very structure of society: "Did 'God so love the church'?" "The new shape of the Gospel will destroy the old shape of the church."

In a day of anti-institutionalism many with Brown are increasingly embarrassed by the sheer physical strength of the churches, tax-sheltered and all. They are feeling a little like the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico in the days of Benito Juárez, owning half the land and all the power, but not a saving presence in society as a whole; in brief a parasitic sub-culture.

But due mainly, I feel, to cultural and geographical distances between sectors in the church, a whole lot of Presbyterians feel uneasy about the idea of a "new shape of the Gospel." See below.

PRE-ASSEMBLY: STEWARDSHIP CONFERENCE

When Winburn Thomas was in Los Angeles some months ago, he witnessed a three-man team of laymen here give so solid a pitch at a Stewardship conference that he signed them up for the big-league at Portland. They did a superb job. One man commented wryly that their presentation was on a higher spiritual level than the Evangelism Conference. They clobbered the audience with statistics and mechanics and practical advice (e.g. "Don't be a pigeon-picker-- finding one good man and washing the session's hands of stewardship by dumping the whole matter in his lap"), but they also spoke feelingly and earnestly of the holy obligation we have to uphold our church.

PRE-ASSEMBLY: ROBERT E. SPEER'S 100th YEAR MEMORIAL

John Mackay's address the night before the Assembly at this Speer service was one of the highest points of inspiration for me. One of his best addresses; and that is a very strong statement indeed. Someone on the committee that chose Mackay to do this had asked, "Is a man of his age up to this? This will be a large, public meeting..." He did a magnificent job, on the life of a magnificent man. There were giants in those days...

THE 179th GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Before you go you receive the following:

"White Book": 20 pages, detailed programs for all services of worship; 20 pages, detailed proposed docket (time table for Synod schedule); 30 pages, list of official commissioners, advisory delegates (these are the missionaries or fraternal worker delegates), and corresponding members (agency personnel, e.g. nine from COEMAR Commission and Staff); 23 pages Overtures A to I, sent "down" to presbyteries last year, presbyteries for and against; 30 pages, Overtures 1 to 39, new business to be voted on this time. 140 pages total.

"Blue Book" (389 pp.): While the White Book is, you might say, purely ecclesiastical or legislative, the Blue Book contains the reports from the maze of special committees, commissions, councils, boards, etc., some temporary, some permanent, ranging from "The Temporary Commission on Continuing Education" through the "Board of Directors of Presbyterian Life," the "United Presbyterian Women," (and men), the "Department of Chaplains and Service Personnel" to a 100 page report from the Counseling Committee on Church and Society. Oh yes, there is also the "Office of the General Assembly" (25 pages) and the "General Council" (70 pages). This book was being referred to throughout the entire assembly because the docket would call up the bodies reporting from time to time. Often no action was required; sometimes the reports asked the G.A. to do such and such, so that action was taken. Example of latter was Church and Society; see below.

"Preliminary Reports of Major Agencies" (403 pages): National Missions 117 pages; COEMAR, 162 pages; Christian Education, 79 pages; Pensions, 45 pages. Apparently the Council on Theological Education is not a "major program agency" and therefore is found in the Blue Book. (It is less obvious why COEMAR's division of Ecumenical Relations is in the Blue Book rather than this book. Perhaps because it used to report separately before the COEMAR existed? Do we then need two new acronyms, COEM and COER in order to handle this distinction? However, the latest development at 475 I understand is the elimination of this distinction in the structure of the staff. So do we now have COEMR?) Let's hope that these and all other reports in their final version will be condensed, popularized and illustrated again this year in another popular handbook for all Presbyterians.

"Manual of the General Assembly" (153 pp): This is a gathering together of (church) constitutional law on the General Assembly, the G.A.'s own "Standing Rules" by-laws, etc. reorganized and recapitulated in the same way as are the two books for lower judicatories "Presbyterian Law for the Local Church," and "Presbyterian Law for the Presbytery." (It is a guide book to the way the General Assembly works.) It even includes the special Presbyterian parliamentary procedures which hold for synods, presbyteries, and sessions, and are at one or two points disturbingly different from Robert's Rules of Order; that is, disturbing to those commissioners who have not often been to Presbytery or whose sessions have merely followed Robert's Rules.

"Also Rans" (287 pages): Supplement to Blue Book, 27 pages; Report of United Presbyterian Foundation, 74 pages; and Proposed Book of Confessions, 186 pages.

All these printed books with relatively fine print were sent to each commissioner in advance, to be read prior to arrival at the General Assembly. There are 1,085 pages in the four listed separately without counting the 287 pages in the three thinner books. Then after you arrive the Board of National Missions slipped you a fat packet of brochures and some 50 pages of late-late mimeo reports plus a 74-page book on "The Church and the Aging" (reporting many interesting things including the "disturbing" fact that the millions poured into senior citizens' homes help only 5% of our church's aging; and the Board of Christian Education had a large printed document describing their new shape; some committee gave us all a 193-page book examining the Lutheran and Reformed tradition side-by-side. Lucky I only bought seven additional books at the large Westminster book display!

Then, finally, of course, the "Standing Committees" are elected by the 22 (arbitrary regional groups) "electing sections" and they begin to chew away on all these above reports and spew forth their own mimeographed series of reports, which are then the tenderized, precooked, pre-digested materials served up to the Assembly's plenary attention. These reports are hauled away by the commissioner in a special, clamp-release notebook handily provided for this purpose.

O.K., now what actually happened? The main point is that the Assembly gets its work done by assigning its concerns to committees and agencies, by requiring detailed reports and recommendations, and then by establishing special "Standing Committees" (e.g. groups to review) which meet between and apart during the week, and only then after all this, hearing out the results on the floor of the General Assembly, and usually, by this time, approving the work. This would be quite erroneously assumed to be rubber-stamp work. Even the original reports come from agencies and committees whose memberships are created through a nominating committee of the G.A.--which certainly exerted an independent force this year.

However, even after things get to the floor there is time for any individual commissioner to raise his questions, and in many cases changes were wrought on the floor of the Assembly. I'll mention three.

1. Selective Conscientious Objection. At present the law only allows people to be against all wars or none. The possibility of objecting to a specific war but not necessarily all wars survived the standing committee but was voted down by the plenary session.

2. Failure of North Viet Nam bombing. A couple of paragraphs in the "Declaration of Conscience" implying that such action had been futile were stricken. This was part of a lengthy session that lasted until midnight.

3. Word as well as Deed evangelism? The evangelism report stressed "involvement" more than "proclamation," and any traditional definition of evangelism. A carefully wrought but lengthy paragraph was proposed by one

commissioner very earnestly to replace a small paragraph he felt to be inadequate. After a good deal of friendly discussion this man's paragraph was decisively adopted.

In any case, "Involvement Evangelism" is the new powerful phrase that forces us to give greater attention to the problem of visible, undeniable "credibility in evangelism." The world has got to see our works not merely hear our words. But perhaps I can't do more here than to report that this emphasis was presented as "The New Shape of the Gospel" (Brown) or as "Third Force Evangelism" (Arnold Come's phrase for the "vertical dispersion" into social structure that should now follow the "horizontal dispersion" of geographical evangelism and mission.) For conservative consumption I feel it is much better not to call this new at all but a "return to the full Biblical meaning of the Gospel." In this regard Come's characterization of the first fifteen centuries as "introversion-with-emphasis-on-afterlife," and then the Reformation-to-now period as horizontal expansion leaves something to be desired and is by no means a characterization of Christian history that is preferable to a recognition of these dimensions (inward, geographical, and socio-political) in the prophets of all centuries, whether Moses, Amos, Augustin, or Wesley.

But now some other items: Some of you may have heard that the General Assembly reacted against the establishment by electing a small-town moderator. This may only have been a small part of it. I think equally or more important was the honest Christian desire to represent the church's concern for poverty areas by choosing a man who has faithfully and outstandingly served among the rural, by-passed poor. (Or, am I only registering my own rural-Guatemalan sentiments?)

The Presbyterians United for a Biblical Confession had a large breakfast and address (all part of the printed G.A. program). Mackay spoke again. The topic was the New Revolution in Latin America, and he warned that the future of Latin America may be in the hands of the neo-catholic and neo-pentecostal movements if evangelicals don't get on the ball. There was no reference to the Confession issue, this organization having decided to let the issue rest and occupy itself with evangelism and mission as an aspect of "Biblical Confession." Mackay implied at one point that new organizations like the Latin America Mission and P.U.B.C. are becoming stout and useful "protestant orders," which is a very novel thought to drop into the on-going ecumenical discussion-- it may cause more than a ripple.

But the Confession issue, having been ratified by all but I think 19 presbyteries, was no longer a very live issue. A few rallied around the idea that the total omission of the Larger Catechism was more than the amending powers possessed by the General Assembly. The answer is that if the church could create the constitution, it could also modify it to any extent. One commissioner finally asked (after the final confirming vote) what will happen to those individual ministers or individual churches that are not in favor of the changes, or who were ordained on the basis of a different subscription formula. The answer given was that those who believe something they feel is more exactly expressed are not going to find any judicatory taking action against them on the basis of what are regarded by some now to be looser vows. Any action will be on their own initiative.

To herald this final decision Carl McIntyre was on hand creatively: up drove a large black hearse, out they pulled a large black casket with a sign on the side "The Death of a Church," carted it around and around before returning it to the hearse and driving off. A paperback book with the same

title, also the work of McIntyre, is a detailing of the whole treasure trove of his carefully nursed grievances. His introductory two pages, which point out the many ways our church is trying to adjust to new forces and factors, is in some ways an admirable statement of what we really are trying to do. Sorry about that!

Too bad some of his people didn't come into the Coliseum and in a prolonged look note the evidences here and there of real devotion and solid consecration. Good natured humor rippled the assembly on many occasions, but there was never the slightest trace of levity in poor taste. As for the total absence of drinking and minimal existence of smoking, it could almost have been a Methodist meeting. But the brisk common-sense that cut through many a potential hassle, and the steady order that always prevailed (we even ended an hour early) was characteristically Presbyterian.

All in all, the assembly did not move as far and as fast as the avant gard thinkers wanted it to, but it was nevertheless remarkably open, responsive, and understanding, and there prevailed throughout every moment a good spirit, tolerant of the most back-woods commissioner, and of the most speculative theorist. I don't see how anyone could have sat there as I did for every single minute of every session and not come to love that vast group of men.

You would have been proud of the Advisory Delegates, too. We sat way in the back taking it all in, kibbitzing and discussing almost every point among ourselves, BUT ON EVERY ISSUE WE SUCCESSFULLY RESISTED THE TEMPTATION TO STEP TO THE MICROPHONE ONLY 15 FEET AWAY!

We did get up on the platform, though, at the time of the COEMAR report (or I should say one part of it). At that time Don Black gave a perfectly tremendous report of the fabulous situation that is breaking in Indonesia. What McGavran would not do to get a copy of that! Then John C. Smith gave some very touching additional insights into Robert E. Speer, especially his Board of Foreign Missions sphere of work. These were both solid stuff, with a rapt audience. Somehow--I may be prejudiced--the COEMAR people are certainly the Marines of the Presbyterian kingdom. Maybe that is a bad comparison these days. But others and their reports achieved with great difficulty what COEMAR presentations gained with ease--a really solid balance in the things that really count.