Ecumenical history of Latin America

(From "A History of the Ecumenical Movement", 2004, WCC Publications)

by Dafne Sabanes Plou

At the Edinburgh world missionary conference in 1910, cooperation between Protestant missions in Latin America was not included on the agenda. The decision not to discuss this issue was taken in light of the fact that German mission societies and the Church of England both viewed Latin America as a territory historically linked to the Roman Catholic Church and held that it would be "anti-Catholic" to speak of Protestant missions on the continent.1 To avoid a debate that could create obstacles to broad ecumenical cooperation in mission development, the organizers of the Edinburgh conference limited its agenda to the "non-Christian world".2 However, in 1913 the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America (CCLA) was formed, which would play an important role in Protestant church work for most of the 20th century.

In 1916 the CCLA organized the Panama congress on mission in Latin America, a milestone for Christianity in the region. The leaders of missionary societies working there, however, who were not in agreement with the organizers of Edinburgh, studied Protestant work in each country and saw the need for joint church action and cooperation. The congress emphasized education and the setting up of schools as an important step in strengthening the Protestant presence in South America.

In 1949, the first Latin American evangelical conference (CELA I) took place in Buenos Aires.3 It was the first initiative of this kind taken by the 18 churches which alone decided on the agenda and the message produced by the conference. Evangelization, the presence of Protestantism in Latin America, and cooperation between different church bodies were among the major themes. It was the first time also that delegates from churches so diverse had come together - Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Congregationalists and Baptists, Reformed and Presbyterians, Nazarenes and Pentecostals.

In the early 1960s Latin America was deep in economic, political and social change. The urbanization and industrialization process, which had been growing during the 1950s, increased in the 1960s, bringing with it a rise in urban marginalization; agriculture was not modernized, and there was a growing dependence on foreign capital, not only in industry but increasingly also in the financial and service sectors. In the political arena, social, labour and student movements grew stronger as the socialist revolution took place in Cuba. A conviction that one could defeat the imperialism imposed by foreign powers and governments in Latin America - particularly by the US - awakened an important social movement.

Politically, the blockade of Cuba and a bloody military coup in Brazil, followed by systematic repression of social movements and their leaders, led to a doctrine of "national security" which buttressed the state terrorism that was to characterize Latin American politics throughout the 1970s and part of the 1980s. Meanwhile, economic and political thinking in Latin America was changing substantially. A new theory appeared, that of "dependence", which held that the logic of existing capitalist structures did not allow for development to be accompanied by economic and social integration.4

The second Latin American evangelical conference (CELA II), in Lima in 1961, was an important stage in developing dialogue and cooperation in Latin America. It called for a deeper involvement of the churches in the social reality of the continent. It emphasized a common vocation for unity, but
ideological differences between and within the churches thwarted the creation of an entity that could embody the desire to foster cooperation. Some voices denounced CELA II as a communist event, which provoked the brief detention of three ecumenical leaders, John A. Mackay, José Míguez Bonino and Tomas Ligget, accused of exerting Marxist influence. Such tensions, arising from differing views of Christian social responsibility, were to continue for a long time, hindering ecumenical cooperation between churches.

Among the church-related movements arising at this time were church and society in Latin America (ISAL - Iglesia y Sociedad en América Latina), which stimulated an innovative dialogue between theology and the social sciences, and the Latin American Protestant commission for Christian education (Celadec - Comisión Evangélica Latinoamericana de Educación Cristiana), which professed an "evangelical option on behalf of the poor" and a decision to contribute "to the construction of a Latin American church" as "a coherent response to the historical interests of the poor and their liberation in every Latin American situation".

The churches in Latin America were close to the people and thus shared in their fears and hopes. They were already engaged in social action, but the creation of a series of structured ecumenical entities provided the instruments necessary for intellectual theological analysis. All these movements stimulated the internal life of the churches and strengthened their witness in society.

In 1963, representatives of church organizations from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay met in Rio de Janeiro and issued the "Corcovado Declaration", calling for the establishment of the provisional evangelical committee on Christian unity in Latin America (Unelam - Comisión Provisional Pro Unidad Evangélica Latinoamericana). Unelam was founded in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1964, and held its constitutive assembly in Campinas, Brazil, in 1965. Benjamin Moraes from Brazil was elected president and Emilio Castro from Uruguay was designated part-time general secretary. Its main objective was to stimulate cooperation in the life, mission and witness of the churches throughout Latin America. Unelam was to fulfill the CELA II mandate of convening a third Latin American evangelical conference.

An important landmark in the development of ecumenical thought with relation to the social commitment of Christians in Latin America was the world conference on Church and Society held in 1966 in Geneva. Forty-two Latin American delegates participated, and Unelam organized a follow-up consultation on church and society in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 1967.

A new call to ecumenism

The third Latin American evangelical conference (CELA III) was held in 1969 in Buenos Aires, with 206 delegates from 23 Latin American countries and 40 denominations. For the first time, observers from the Roman Catholic Church were invited, an indication of the new ecumenical openness introduced by Vatican II and the second general conference of Latin American bishops (Celam II) in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. Pentecostal church leaders were also involved for the first time.

The theme of CELA III, "Debtors to the World", was based on Romans 1:14, "I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." For CELA III analysts, among them the theologian Orlando Costas, this conference made evident the need to define the prophetic mission of the Protestant churches in Latin America, in light both of the social, political and economic changes then taking place, and the new challenge of dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. In this sense,
CELA III represented the emergence of a new theology and a new model of mission in which "the church can find itself only in its service to Jesus Christ in the world", a service which requires "the incarnation of the church in the life and conflicts of society".6

However, there were definite divergences between the delegations from the different churches and countries at CELA III. Many churches did not agree with the proposed dialogue with Roman Catholics, as they did not believe in their sincerity. Para-church movements shook the meeting with a fiery document that was extremely critical of the position of the churches regarding the social changes taking place, and that accused them of adopting a conservative socio-political stance that legitimated US imperialism.7

However, the Vatican II "Decree on Ecumenism" (Unitatis Redintegratio) and subsequent ecumenical directives orienting the Roman Catholic Church towards ecumenism opened the door for dialogue between Catholics and Protestants. First contacts took place between clergy and teaching theologians during Vatican II, but it was not until Celam II in 1968 that the foundation was laid for ongoing dialogue. The organizers of the bishops conference invited a group of Protestant observers and, according to José Míguez Bonino, a president of the WCC from 1975 to 1983 and an official observer both at Vatican II and Medellín, these observers participated more freely and openly than had been possible at Rome. The bishops often quoted explicitly from Protestant documents, and certain observers helped to prepare the final statements of the conference, an indication of the depth of spiritual encounter.

The final documents expressly mentioned ecumenism at only three points related to cooperation, social issues and education. Nevertheless, the significance of these points for non-Roman Catholic churches was considerable, given the emphasis on the incarnation of the gospel in the struggles and needs of the people of Latin America.

**Liberation theology and anti-ecumenical reaction**

The philosophical breakthrough that took place in the social sciences in Latin America during the 1960s was of great importance since it was on the basis of the "theory of dependence" that a "theology of liberation" began to appear. The dialogue between the social sciences and theology was manifest in grassroots or base communities (communidades de base), in Catholic and Protestant youth organizations, and in ecumenical para-church movements.

Liberation theology, however, was not the fruit of academic reflection; its origins were rather in the pastoral activity of the churches. Priests and ministers working at grassroots level made a valuable contribution to the formulation of this theology. Initial mimeographed documents were circulated and studied throughout the continent after Vatican II and Medellín. They were used by para-church movements and groups of priests and religious who began to organize themselves in the various countries. The Peruvian Roman Catholic Gustavo Gutiérrez, an adviser to the student movements in his country, as well as Protestants such as Rubem Alves from Brazil and Míguez Bonino from Argentina, studied the possible theological basis for a praxis of social change on the continent. The term "liberation theology" was used for the first time in print in 1971 by Alves and Gutiérrez. The latter took it as the title of his work, *Teología de la Liberación: Perspectivas (A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation)*, which was to prove fundamental in the development of this new approach to Christian theology.
Despite all these positive encounters, the Latin American ecumenical movement was forcefully opposed during this period. In the 1950s hundreds of former US missionaries to China were expelled from that country. Many came to Latin America, and their presence strengthened evangelical fundamentalism and its criticisms of progressive trends.

In 1969, Protestant Evangelicals held a first Latin American evangelism congress (Clade I) in Bogota, Colombia, under the theme "Action in Christ for a Continent in Crisis". According to reports from the 920 participants, the congress was a valuable experience but "many were disillusioned by its social myopia and lack of theological depth". For these participants, Clade I failed because it "did not give priority to the problems of poverty, oppression and social, economic and political corruption". They also criticized the fact that the congress did not recognize the opportunities offered by the changes taking place in Roman Catholicism. In contrast, the missionary Peter Wagner published *Teología Latinoamericana, ¿radical o evangélica?* (Latin American Theology: Radical or Evangelical?) in which he criticized ecumenical Protestantism. Several younger Evangelicals protested this publication, pointing out that it created divisions among Protestants at a time when there were good opportunities for dialogue and joint work.

**The political scene of the 1970s**

The victory of Popular Unity in Chile in 1970 revived the hope of grassroots and social movements that it would still be possible to bring about essential changes in Latin America by democratic means. With the triumph of Salvador Allende in Chile and the emergence of other governments with popular support - in Argentina, Peru, Bolivia and Honduras - hope for social and political change seemed to rest on the democratic participation of the people themselves.

Reaction came swiftly, however. In 1969, Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York state and an adviser to President Richard Nixon, issued the celebrated "Rockefeller report" which expressed concern over the nationalist positions adopted by several Latin American governments and the strong determination of the Latin American people to work for social change. The report paid particular attention to the demands of "internal security" in order to safeguard the huge North American interests in the continent. A number of political analysts hold that US secretary of state Henry Kissinger was instrumental in reinforcing the role played by Latin American armed forces during the 1970s. He encouraged a series of military agreements that made them the "police over their own peoples, militarizing their civil and political life and structuring a system of norms outside of the political constitutions, known as national security norms, that were to become the spinal column of the reactionary and monopolistic forces that pushed for the establishment of a new fascism".

In just a few years, those countries where social and grassroots movements had begun to effect significant change suffered repressive military coups - in Uruguay and Chile (1973), El Salvador (1974), Peru and Honduras (1975), and Ecuador and Argentina (1976) - that stifled all hope for change by initiating policies that involved the systematic violation of human rights and the death, disappearance and exile of opponents.

The dominant and powerful groups, whose supremacy was threatened by the social activism of workers and campesinos, backed the military regimes and completely ignored violations of human rights. The doctrine of national security encouraged joint actions of repression, such as the "Condor Operation" in the Southern Cone, in which military forces from several countries came together to persecute, imprison and even assassinate political opponents who were refugees or exiled from their own
countries.

In 1977, with the arrival of the Carter administration in Washington, the international situation in relation to the military governments in Latin America changed. President Jimmy Carter began with a policy of "planetary humanism", which reflected a foreign policy with a discernable moral dimension, in part to compensate for defeat in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. American policy on Latin America underwent important changes: a softening in its relations with Cuba, an acceptance of demands made by Panama concerning the canal, and a campaign against the violation of human rights in many Latin American countries ruled by military dictatorships. Actions by the Carter administration reinforced public denunciations of violations in international fora and encouraged the formation of North American and European solidarity groups and organizations dedicated to support Latin American democracy, aid exiles, and save the lives of those who had been kidnapped and detained.

**Ecumenism BETWEEN the churches**

CELA III endorsed the first four years of Unelam's work, and encouraged Unelam to disseminate the resolutions of CELA II and to hold regional meetings leading towards a fourth CELA event. Unelam thus moved from being a provisional commission to becoming a stable structure. In 1970, it held its second general assembly and became a regional organization for coordinating ecumenical activities. Studies were promoted on themes relating to ecumenism, the political role of the churches, nonviolent action for social change, theological reflection on mission, the role of women in church and society and relations to the Pentecostal movement. Most ambitiously, Unelam worked on a distinctively Latin American Christology. It also promoted programmes related to Indigenous matters and the organization of Bible study workshops. It issued two publications: *Servicio Evangélico de Información* (Evangelical Information Service), and *Testimonio Cristiano* (Christian Witness), a magazine on the training of lay people.

In 1972, at a consultation in Asunción, Paraguay, Unelam together with the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) denounced the racial discrimination of the Indigenous Peoples and supported the creation of organizations for defending their rights. In a joint project, PCR and Unelam formed ecumenical work groups, which included Roman Catholics, to concentrate on specific areas where Indigenous communities were oppressed. Unelam was also concerned about the situation of Latin American women; in 1975, the International Year of Women, encounters and seminars were organized in different countries for women who were leaders in their churches and regions.

The main strength of Unelam was that it related closely, in all aspects of its work, to the churches which participated fully in the organization. However, the juridical basis of Unelam was councils of churches and church federations, which at the time were going through a difficult period of internal readjustment, especially as they were having to face military dictatorships. Many people in the ecumenical movement were persecuted because of their political stands and were forced to go into exile. In addition, reconciling "progressives" and "conservatives" was increasingly difficult. The ideological conflict present throughout South and Central America only aggravated these difficulties.

In 1975, largely at the initiative of Unelam, a broad consultation involving 144 national church bodies from Latin America and the Caribbean sought to discover the will of the churches in relation to Christian unity. Many felt that Unelam's work had reached an end and that something new was needed, perhaps the creation of a body representing all the churches in the whole continent. Thus it was that in
1977, at a meeting in Panama with delegates from 85 national church bodies from the entire continent, Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean, the decision was taken to convene a major assembly of churches to consider the creation of a more representative regional ecumenical organization.

Unelam's call for a continental assembly of churches resulted in the September 1978 Oaxtepec, Mexico, assembly: 194 delegates took part, representing 110 church bodies and ten ecumenical organizations from 19 Latin American and Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries. Twenty-five percent of these delegates represented Pentecostal churches, itself an important ecumenical milestone. This assembly met under the theme "Unity and Mission in Latin America".

The assembly was based on what were called "four foundations": the eucharist, led each day by a different denominational family, which encouraged deeper ecumenical understanding; Bible study based on the epistle to the Ephesians; study and analysis of the Latin American situation in the church socially, politically, economically and culturally; and personal encounter between delegates.

Assembly delegates agreed to create the Latin American Council of Churches (In Formation), with four main objectives:

- to work for unity within the Protestant family;
- to base this search for unity on a number of basic doctrinal principles;
- to express this unity in concrete witness at all levels of church life;
- to manifest the solidarity of the churches with the people and their hopes.

Bishop Federico Pagura of the Methodist Church in Argentina was elected president and a four-year period for full constitutional formation was set, thus providing an opportunity for other churches and ecumenical groups to affiliate.

Practical ecumenical action was particularly visible at the time of the Nicaragua and Guatemala earthquakes in 1974 and 1976. Relief efforts by the churches and other expressions of international solidarity were pivotal in the rebuilding of devastated areas and in attending to thousands of victims.

**Problems for the ecumenical organizations**

The para-church ecumenical movements, which had often been founded by laity, also underwent significant changes from the mid-1960s, changes which distanced them from the churches and also from their populist roots. The groups became intellectual and exclusive and a virtually automatic connection began to appear between revolutionary political activism and participation in these organizations. Criticism of the "institutional church" intensified and mutually enriching contacts between churches and these movements became minimal.

The notion that evangelism and social action were antagonistic sharpened this separation and isolated the para-church movements. Further, political persecution wreaked havoc among the movements' leadership, since many were imprisoned, some died for their cause, and others chose exile. The result was the creation of a new organization, Latin American ecumenical social action (ASEL - Acción Social Ecuménica Latinoamericana) with headquarters in Mexico.

The understanding that these progressive movements had of the churches changed in light of the
churches' actions against dictatorships in the struggle for human rights and in defence of life. So the church was rediscovered and understood as both object and subject of mission, and the strained relations that had existed for a decade began to improve.

In the dynamics of the interdenominational dialogue that took place during this period, the birth of the Latin American theological fellowship (FTL - Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana) should also be noted as an important instance of cooperation among young leaders from the more conservative Protestant churches. This organization was founded by pastors and theologians dissatisfied with Clade I, who felt it was time for an Indigenous leadership to arise among Latin American Evangelicals. It was seen as necessary to curb the strong influence of fundamentalist missionaries who dominated both Protestantism and Clade I. This leadership asserted that the task of evangelism should not be divorced from social concern or from the massive political changes taking place in the region. The FTL was to concentrate on evangelical theological reflection within the Latin American context, during which it became acutely aware of the changes taking place on the continent.

The FTL was constituted in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 1970, precisely to promote theological reflection and encourage the publication of Christian literature, including the significant journal Boletín Teológico. No official ties were established with any church body; members were individuals and did not officially represent churches. During the 1970s, the FTL sponsored consultations on a variety of themes including social issues. Although its leaders participated in the World Congress on Evangelism in Lausanne in 1974, they distanced themselves from the most conservative and fundamentalist currents present in that congress.

From its very beginning the FTL maintained institutional independence, and its leaders were Protestants representing different trends of thought. Thus, while some of its members participated actively in the Latin American Council of Churches, others were found in other organizations. FTL leaders were critical of the lay para-church movements in light of their avant-garde political positions and their distance from the churches. They felt that the reflection taking place within these organizations had been determined by an ideology based solely on the political, social and economic situation of Latin America. In spite of these objections, however, the FTL recognized their efforts to influence the real situation of the Latin American people. In this sense, the FTL also emphasized the need to do theology in dialogue with concrete reality, in the service of praxis. It saw theology as an instrument of transformation.

In 1972, endorsed by a number of Roman Catholic priests, Protestant pastors and laity committed to liberation theology, the movement Christians for socialism (Cristianos por el Socialismo) was born in Chile, holding its first international event that year with delegates from several Latin American countries. Although independent of the churches, this movement has had an important influence on ecumenical thinking linked to the new theological trend. Subsequently, however, the Roman Catholic Church in Chile condemned this movement and after the coup of 1973 it was ruthlessly repressed by the state.

**The struggle for human rights**

The military coup in Chile on 11 September 1973 which resulted in political imprisonments, assassinations, torture, disappearances, and the forced exile of resisters prompted the churches to react in defence of human rights. The Roman Catholic Church, alongside Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal and Orthodox churches and the Hebrew community of Chile, formed the cooperation committee for
peace in Chile. At the same time, the ecumenical national refugee commission was formed.

The cooperation committee's work benefited thousands of victims of political persecution, but due to pressure from the military government it went out of existence on 31 December 1975. The following day, in full accordance with the other churches, the Roman Catholic Church created a vicariate of solidarity. The Protestant churches continued to work through the Christian churches' foundation for social aid (Fasic), formed on 1 April 1975 and representing both the refugee service of the World Council of Churches and the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees. The vicariate and Fasic worked closely together with the support of the WCC.

This collaboration of the WCC in the Latin American struggle for human rights was reinforced by the creation of its Human Rights Resource Office for Latin America, sanctioned by the WCC's fifth assembly at Nairobi in 1975. At the end of that same year, the permanent assembly for human rights was created in Argentina with the participation of political, social and religious leaders. In February 1976, the ecumenical human rights movement was also created in Argentina by six Protestant churches and two Roman Catholic dioceses. The first of these groups worked mainly on denouncing human-rights violations and the second assisted victims of repression, both with WCC support. Protestants and Catholics also worked together in defence of human rights in the church committee of Paraguay, the peace and justice service of Uruguay, and in the Sao Paulo archdiocese in Brazil. In Central America, a WCC human-rights office carried out important work in protesting human-rights violations in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, as well as in aiding refugees who were fleeing from political persecution and the massacres of resistance leaders and Indigenous communities that were convulsing those countries.

**Increased Ecumenical dialogue**

In 1954, the International Missionary Council created a Fund for Theological Education to encourage and develop theological education in missionary areas. A WCC committee visited Latin America to survey existing conditions and needs, and this was followed up by the publication of theological texts, the holding of joint theological seminars, and the creation of resources for training. In 1971 in Buenos Aires the evangelical theological faculty and the evangelical Lutheran faculty joined to become the higher evangelical institute of theological studies (Isedet - Instituto Superior Evangélico de Estudios Teológicos), involving nine Protestant churches. In Costa Rica, also in 1971, the Latin American biblical seminary (Sebila) became independent and made significant academic changes to adapt to a Latin American perspective; 19 Protestant churches were to back this entity.

The dialogue between Catholic and Protestant liberation theologians was intense during these years as an international movement of progressive theologians began to take shape. In 1975, the first Latin American theological encounter took place in Mexico, followed by another meeting on "Theology in the Americas", held in Detroit, US. It was at this conference that Latin American theologians first encountered North American black, Chicano and feminist theologians. In 1976 the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (Eatwot) was created, bringing together scholars from Latin America, Africa and Asia in annual meetings.

Several ecumenical and social science-based centres for theological dialogue and reflection were set up in different countries: the department of ecumenical research and the Victor Sanabria centre in Costa Rica; the Bartolomé de las Casas centre in Lima, Peru; the Antonio Valdivieso centre in Managua, Nicaragua; the Gumilla centre in Caracas, Venezuela; and the Montesinos centre and the theological
research centre in Mexico. To this list should be added the ecumenical documentation and information centre set up in Brazil the previous decade.

Christian-Marxist dialogue also held an interesting place within the ecumenical debates of this period, in particular that developed by the group *Exodo* in Costa Rica, and that between Christians and Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The latter resulted in a seminar on "Christian Faith and the Sandinista Revolution", organized by the Central American university and the Central American historical institute in Managua in 1979, where Father Amando López, SJ, coordinated sessions that involved the participation of both Sandinista commanders and Christian theologians.11

But the main and richest theological debate of the 1970s arose from the preparatory document for the third Latin American bishops conference, in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. According to historian Enrique Dussel, "this is, perhaps, the most important theological debate that has taken place in the history of Latin American theology" since the one started by Las Casas and Sepúlveda in Spain during the period of colonial domination.12 Puebla, with newly elected Pope John Paul II in attendance, was the second bishops conference to develop and approve the church's preferential option for the poor and place itself squarely and openly in solidarity with workers and *campesinos* and all Latin Americans who were living under repression. The theology of liberation was fully affirmed by most bishops, as well as ecumenical solidarity. The debates were lively and open and watched closely by the new pope and the Vatican as a section of conservative bishops close to military regimes and those thought to be part of Opus Dei, the growing reactionary movement in the Roman Catholic Church which had originated in Spain, attempted to return to old roles where church and state were close and interdependent. That part of the church played the part of chaplaincy to the established order, following unquestioningly the oppressive regimes.

Of particular concern to the Puebla meeting was the place of Indigenous Peoples throughout the region and especially in Guatemala, Bolivia, Nicaragua and other countries where Indians existed in large numbers and were among the poorest and most exploited of all Latin Americans.

Puebla came at a critical time for Protestant and Catholic churches to work together for justice and peace as a priority of the churches' mission. Once again, Protestant observers were invited and one working group on dialogue for communion and participation dealt specifically with the issue of ecumenism. In the Puebla document concrete references to the practice of ecumenism appear, in several forms: "practical social", "spiritual", "doctrinal", "biblical", "dialogue" and "witness" ecumenism.

Puebla, however, established clear limits for ecumenical dialogue. According to the document, ecumenism should take place at the institutional level and for many bishops this was the only form of ecumenical manifestation allowed. In that perspective, ecumenism emanating from the grassroots was marginalized, ignored and often rejected because it "overstepped" those boundaries.13

**Ecumenism for justice and peace in the 1980s**

The triumph of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979 bolstered hope throughout Latin America for significant social change. The fact that several well-known active Christians had taken part in the struggle against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza and subsequently became part of the revolutionary government seemed to open up interesting perspectives for many ecumenical Christians who believed in the need to work for revolutionary transformation in the region.
The dialogue between religious communities and the Sandinistas was backed by the declaration "On Religion" made public by the Sandinista National Liberation Front on 7 October 1980. It indicated that "our experience proves one can be a Christian and at the same time a consistent revolutionary; there is no insurmountable contradiction between these two things". Ominously, however, reaction against this view had already been organized. A group of experts who were to be close to President Ronald Reagan, the "Santa Fe committee" of the Council for Inter-American Security, prepared a document advocating a new policy for inter-American relations. It set the foundation for crucial policies of the Reagan administration.

The document began by affirming that war and not peace is the norm ruling international affairs. It asserted that a third world war was imminent and that Latin America and Southeast Asia were to be the scenes of the confrontation. To meet what the document described as the "Soviet-Cuban aggression" which was affecting Latin America, it was again necessary to impose the doctrine of national security. This would allow the US to protect "the independent nations of Latin America from communist conquest", thus helping "to preserve the Hispanic American culture from being sterilized by international Marxist materialism".

The document also held that internal subversion in Latin America was a fact and that the US needed to combat such subversion through its foreign policy, which would involve both suspending the defence of human rights and active opposition to liberation theology.

The 1980s also saw the start of the external debt crisis, which had tremendously negative consequences for the continent. According to reports by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, the lack of economic growth and investment in public measures that could activate the economy stemmed from the fact that large sums of money were required to cover interest on foreign debt. This forced an additional 71 million people to live below even the minimal poverty level. There was a regression from the economic level of the 1960s, and the 1980s became known as the "lost decade". New Latin American democracies that followed the military dictatorships found themselves tied to the decisions of both international financial powers and the major banks that were external creditors. Some analysts have described these democracies as "controlled" because, even though they were backed by popular vote, they could do little or nothing on behalf of the well-being and development of their people. The pressure of corporations and transnational interests required payment on the debt rather than the satisfaction of social needs. Towards the end of the decade, there were social uprisings in several countries, but there were no substantial changes in the economic policies monitored closely by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The birth of the Latin American Council of Churches

Toward the end of 1979, the second Latin American evangelism congress (Clade II) was held in Huampani, Peru, under the theme "May Latin America Hear His Voice". The organizers decided that not more than ten percent of the participants should come from outside the continent, a decision not well accepted by some of the Northern missionary organizations which found it hard to tolerate such independence. This congress, however, marked an important stage in Protestant reflection since a better understanding of the Latin American context, hermeneutical renewal, and a deeper reflection on Protestant social ethics clearly emerged in the presentations and deliberations.

During the four years between the Oaxtepec meeting of Unelam and the constituting assembly of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI - Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias), 1978-82, the board and secretariat of this organization in formation established its presence throughout the
continent. CLAI strengthened its ties with those churches that favoured its formation and worked to establish new relations with denominations and churches that had still not decided to join the new ecumenical body. It also maintained dialogue with already existing ecumenical entities and with international ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches. Part of this latter collaboration consisted in organizing the highly significant Faith and Order meeting in 1982 in Lima, with the participation of 150 theologians from around the world.

Most of the different meetings and consultations held during this period issued clear statements expressing CLAI's commitment to the Latin American reality and its firm intention of continuing to promote the search for a united ecumenical witness on the continent. Among CLAI's tasks was the creation of the pastoral ministry of consolation and solidarity, which called churches once more to assume responsibility in the socio-political field, a field of considerable importance. This ministry accompanied and encouraged different groups in the active defence of human rights, contributed to a ministry to affected persons and channelled emergency resources to situations of natural disaster and war. CLAI also promoted prophetic ministry on the part of its member churches and organizations and encouraged a process of theological reflection on the issues involved.

Nevertheless, not everything was easy for this new organization. As pointed out in the board of directors' report to the constituting assembly, it had to avoid the tensions between "those who wanted to reduce us to immobility and those who wanted to push us towards unbridled activism". It also had to forget old disputes that were "sterile and wearisome" and avoid "all false dichotomies between the personal and social dimensions of the gospel, which have caused so much damage in the past".

The constituting assembly of CLAI was held in Huampani, Peru, in November 1982, under the theme "Jesus Christ, a Vocation Committed to the Kingdom". One hundred and forty-one delegates participated, representing 79 churches and six partner organizations. The Pentecostal churches were once more in the majority, with more than 20 percent of the participants. The assembly ratified Bishop Pagura in the presidency and 85 churches and six ecumenical organizations affirmed their membership.

CLAI structured its work around five regional secretariats: Andean, River Plate, Brazil, Middle America and Hispanic Caribbean, and Greater Colombia; and several programmatic secretariats: women, children and family; Indigenous People and blacks; pastoral care, spirituality and human rights; evangelism and worship; and promotion and communication. From its inception the Council followed the principle of not replacing the churches or duplicating their work, but rather encouraging interdenominational actions that faced priority problems. Although there was a programme concern for evangelism in the areas both of pastoral care and spirituality and ministry to Indigenous People and blacks, there was also evangelizing work. In the first case, this happened through the sharing of resources and education so that "suffering is assumed in a Christian way, with a political, social and theological understanding of its roots and with formation towards changing what can be changed". In the second, an attempt was made to evangelize by seeking unity based on the community and cultural values of the Indigenous Peoples and their struggle for land. Other CLAI initiatives that took on importance during the organization's early years were the Central American pro-peace programme and a new dialogue with Roman Catholicism.

At CLAI's second general assembly, in Indaiatuba, Brazil, in 1988, the initial activities were viewed positively and the image of the organization continued to gain strength. The theme, "The Church: Towards Hope in Solidarity", called member churches to renewed participation based on their
struggles, concerns, needs and daily experiences. Bishop Pagura was re-elected president. On this occasion, the highest percentage of delegates came from Lutheran churches.

Just before the Indaiatuba assembly, a Latin American and Caribbean encounter of ecumenical organizations had taken place in Quito, Ecuador. This marked an important moment of regional ecumenical dialogue since it strengthened the commitment of the ecumenical organizations to a church in solidarity with the poor and the grassroots movements. Representatives from 94 ecumenical groups attended, broadening CLAI's scope of action through their work and support. The encounter became known by the name Mauricio López, in memory of the ecumenical leader who "disappeared" in 1977 under the military dictatorship in Argentina.

**Continued ACTION for human rights**

The 1980s were characterized by the violence of dictatorships and internal wars, particularly in Central America. The decade began with the assassination on 24 March 1980 of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero in San Salvador, and the rape and murder of four American religious sisters, and ended with the killing of six Jesuit priests and their two assistants in November 1989, also in San Salvador. Among them was theologian Ignacio Ellacuría, rector of the Central American university, who had participated actively in ecumenical dialogue in the region. There was, during this period, considerable ecumenical assistance to victims of repression and to thousands of refugees who fled from war to a precarious existence in Honduras and Mexico, even as there was an international ecumenical effort to denounce widespread violations of human rights. More than 70,000 lives were lost to right-wing death squads in ten years of internal conflict.

Guatemala, with more than forty years of US-backed military dictatorships as the core of state power, found itself with at least 150,000 dead, 40,000 disappeared, 50,000 widows, 80,000 orphans and more than 60,000 refugees in neighbouring countries, and a million internally displaced persons, the vast majority being Mayan Indians. Resulting from the army's scorched-earth policy, the Guatemalan churches lost many priests, pastors, religious sisters, catechists, health promoters and faithful, the majority of whom were Indigenous.

In view of the growing impunity of Latin American military dictatorships, ecumenical action in defence of human rights grew stronger. Even as violations became more acute in Central America, nations in the southern part of the continent which had lived under dictatorships - dictatorships worn down by their own peoples and by international opinion - began to take steps towards democracy. The government of Raúl Alfonsín in Argentina was the first to set the foundations for the prosecution of the military for crimes against the civil population when it created a national commission to investigate the "disappearance" of people during dictatorship. Bishops Carlos Gattinoni, Methodist, and Jaime de Nevares, Roman Catholic, both presidents of the permanent assembly for human rights, and Rabbi Marshall Meyer, were all members. Their report, entitled *Never Again (Nunca Más!)*, stands in a series of investigations that produced similar documents in Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil and Chile. They all uncovered the existence of concentration camps, torture, forced abductions of people and thousands of political assassinations. The WCC human-rights office played a significant role by cooperating with churches and ecumenical entities so that the truth about these serious violations would come out.

In Argentina, the investigation provided evidence needed for the 1985 trials against the military juntas. The ecumenical human-rights movement and the permanent assembly for human rights also helped in the investigations. The WCC human-rights office increased its support for the Mothers and
Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in their search for the nearly five hundred children who had disappeared with their parents during the period of dictatorship. In Uruguay, it was with the peace and justice service, under the coordination of the Jesuit Luis Pérez Aguirre, that such ecumenical collaboration took place. In Brazil, the archdiocese of Sao Paulo, under Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, carried out a detailed investigation with ecumenical assistance coordinated by Presbyterian minister Jaime Wright. This investigation consisted in secretly microfilming military files that proved that the systematic torture of political prisoners had been an essential part of the Brazilian military justice system. In Paraguay, a church committee made a detailed investigation of human-rights violations during the thirty years of the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, and in Chile, once democracy had been achieved in 1990, a truth and reconciliation commission carried out its own investigation, with support from human-rights organizations and the Christian Churches' Foundation for Social Aid.

In 1988, the WCC human-rights office and the CLAI pastoral ministry for consolation and solidarity organized an inter-regional encounter on "Human Rights in Asia and Latin America", with delegates from Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Taiwan, South Korea and the Philippines. This experience reaffirmed the importance of establishing closer South-South ecumenical ties in order to develop common strategies for work in the area of human rights.

Actions of solidarity on the part of the churches and ecumenical organizations were important during the Mexico City and El Salvador earthquakes of 1985 and 1986. Thousands of victims received emergency assistance and also benefited from resettlement programmes.

Striving for peace in Central America

By reading the public documents, declarations and official letters sent by CLAI leaders throughout the decade of the 1980s, one can follow in detail the ecumenical work for peace in Central America. CLAI created a pro-peace programme and cooperated with other ecumenical bodies: the Caribbean Conference of Churches, the WCC through its Human Rights Resources Office for Latin America, and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. These ecumenical bodies supported the Contadora group and the efforts of the Esquipulas summit in 1987, where an historic peace accord was signed between the presidents of five Central American countries (Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador).

This programme in Central America effectively mobilized many human, spiritual, economic and diplomatic resources, showing the importance of ecumenism in international relations, both between nations and between churches and other Christian organizations. In 1987, after the signing of the Esquipulas II agreement, a delegation from the ecumenical organizations visited the five Central American countries, meeting with the presidents and visiting national reconciliation commissions and church authorities.

On Easter Sunday 1988 in Nicaragua, a representative group of Christians from Central America addressed a document to the churches and to the world at large, "Kairos Centroamericano". The document pointed out that the region had been experiencing "an opportunity of grace, a decisive hour, a particularly active time within the area of the history of salvation". This declaration was inspired by the 1985 Kairos document of South African church leaders and had as its immediate context the peace process initiated by the Esquipulas II agreement. Sixty delegates from ecumenical churches, groups and organizations in the region signed the document which uses analysis based on liberation theology and the base communities. It was aimed at Christians in Central America and the US in the conviction that
these were the people most directly involved in the conflicts in the region. According to many scholars, these Kairos documents were a new theological genre characterized by a contextual theology; they were drawn up collectively, and were confessional and prophetic in nature, the result of extensive ecumenical interchange.

Earlier, ecumenical work for peace had also played a role during the 1982 Malvinas-Falkland Islands war between Argentina and Great Britain. As soon as the war started, the British Council of Churches invited representatives from Argentine Protestant churches to a meeting in the United Kingdom. Because of the hostilities and the cancellation of flights between both countries, only José Míguez Bonino, who happened to be teaching in Brazil at the time, was able to attend. It was nevertheless an important occasion for dialogue and mutual understanding. When the war ended, the British Council of Churches organized a visit of Argentine church leaders to Great Britain. The delegation was sent by a consultative council formed of churches affiliated with Isedet, the ecumenical theological seminary in Buenos Aires. During this visit, Argentine delegates had the opportunity to talk with leaders of British churches and to visit local parishes and other church organizations in order to communicate their churches' position on the war and their commitment to peace and friendship between the Argentine and British people.

Roman Catholic Criticism of liberation theology

In 1980, Celam, the Latin American bishops conference, organized a seminar for Central American bishops. This marked the beginning of sharp criticism of liberation theology by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. A first indication of rejection of this theology by some bishops had already occurred in 1974 at a seminar in Bogota, where the secretariat of Celam was located. This seminar, meeting under the theme "Liberation: Dialogue in Celam", did not initially seem to have major repercussions. However, it was in 1980 that the Santa Fe document was published, in which the conservative think-tank known as the Council for Inter-American Security pointed to the danger of Marxist ideology which it saw in liberation theology. Rejection of a dialogue between Christians and Marxists was also made clear in the highly critical visit made by John Paul II to Nicaragua in 1983 where he publicly chastised several activist proponents of liberation theology, both clergy and lay.

In 1984 the Vatican issued two instructions. The first, "Instruction on Liberation Theology", seriously criticized the movement. The document generated an important theological debate both in Latin America and the US and Europe. By then, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (Eatwot) had encouraged the development of forms of liberation theology throughout the Christian world. The Vatican's questioning specifically touched Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff. Boff's book The Church: Charisma or Power questioned the Roman church's exercise of "earthly power" in contrast to its calling to be a prophetic church committed to the poor and to building the kingdom through service and in the midst of poverty.19

Later in the year, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published another document, "Instructions on Some Aspects of Liberation Theology". This created an even larger theological controversy than that caused by the preparatory papers for the Puebla conference in the 1970s. Leonardo Boff was silenced by the Vatican for a full year. The work of liberation theologians, however, continued with force, particularly in Central America where the centre of much Latin American ecumenical thinking had moved. The dimensions of this work were expanded by reflection on the meaning of martyrdom, since there were many priests, pastors, catechists and faithful Christians - Catholics and Protestants - in Central America who were being persecuted and murdered for their
loyalty to the gospel.

Dialogue and the "people's church"

Although the controversy over liberation theology placed the conference of Latin American bishops at a distance from the organized ecumenical movement, dialogue and joint work continued at the level of several dioceses and of CLAI, as well as at the parish level, particularly in the ecumenical base communities and within the movement of the so-called "people's church" (iglesia popular), grassroot groups that took a radical prophetic line in relation both to society and to the church.

In 1986, the first consultation of Latin American and Caribbean bishops and pastors was held in Cuenca, Ecuador, sponsored by the conference of Ecuadorian bishops, CLAI and the Caribbean Conference of Churches. The theme was "Contemporary Religious Movements: A Challenge to the Churches". This event was an important landmark in ecumenical dialogue within the region since, as stated in the final document, it called Roman Catholics and Protestants to decide on "an attitude of ecumenical dialogue not only among ourselves, but also with the leaders and other members of religious movements", and also to "face the challenge posed by contemporary religious movements, maintaining our own faith in a better way in order to help our people to recover the truth of the gospel". In addition, it agreed to promote ecumenism beyond mere dialogue, living in liberating solidarity with the poor so that ecumenical initiatives might arise from authentic encounters at the grassroots.

Christian participation in grassroots movements developed into what some theologians considered to be a new ecclesiology based on the so-called "people's church". The popular church was seen as the one convened by the poor as they received the word of God and evangelized. This movement was evident mainly in Central America and Brazil, where the largest growth both of base communities and of other Christian communities committed to the worker and campesino movements took place. The hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church split over these developments. Some bishops saw them as responses to the Puebla document in which the base communities had been pointed to as "hubs of evangelism", "motors of liberation" and "a source of ministries". More conservative bishops considered them to be an alternate location of power that had to be opposed.

In the 1980s, several ecumenical enterprises became more active, including the movement of biblical scholars and theologians and the programmes of several centres for theological study and reflection. The ecumenical research centre also continued to carry out important work through its offices in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. This centre had been founded in the 1960s and had been instrumental in bringing together important Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking scholars and leaders, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. In 1982, the ecumenical centre for evangelization and education of the people was founded in Sao Paulo and became an important regional training centre for ecumenical and grassroots leaders. Also during this decade, the movement arose in both Protestant and Roman Catholic circles of women theologians and biblical scholars who carried out their study and reflection from clearly feminist perspectives. Many of these persons became members of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians.

The socio-political situation at the end of the 1980s

Towards the end of 1988 the committee that in 1980 had published the Santa Fe document released another statement known as Santa Fe II. In it they underscored the emphases made previously and also pointed out new problems facing US relations with Latin America. Additionally, the statement
indicated possible ways for strengthening US interests south of the Rio Grande.

The authors of Santa Fe II were mainly concerned about the displacement of millions of persons due to "Marxist violence, poverty, bad governmental administration and the increase in general of anarchy and corruption in Latin America". Clearly the US at that moment was concerned about a possible "export" of the Nicaraguan revolution to other countries, and about the drug trade, particularly from Colombia to North America. The document also pointed to the trend of the new Latin American democracies towards statism, emphasizing the need for the US to participate actively in developing national private capital markets and a free enterprise system in order to speed the dismantling of public enterprises and thus the privatization of all public property.

Santa Fe II showed concern about the "subversive-terrorist threat" perceived in Nicaragua. It supported "a sophisticated development of the doctrine of low intensity conflict" which had been supported by military aid to counter-revolutionary forces - the Contras - based in Honduras. Although, according to the analysis, the Contras had lost power and prestige, President Daniel Ortega's Sandinista government had to participate in so many peace negotiations that it lost political power. In addition, the constant threat of an escalation of the war and the increasing poverty of the Nicaraguan people made it difficult in the democratic elections of 1990 for the Sandinistas to win against the conservative coalition parties.

Just days before Christmas 1989, US troops invaded Panama as part of its "fight against drugs" and apprehended General Manuel Noriega, the head of state. In this invasion, B-52 planes indiscriminately bombed poor areas, killing an unknown number of civilians. It was clear that the recommendations of Santa Fe II were being implemented; they were to influence the political, social and economic life of Latin America during the next several years.

In the economic sphere, the external debt crisis remained critical; there were no possibilities for an early solution to the problem. The fall of authoritarian socialist governments in Eastern Europe strengthened capitalism and the view that the "free market" was the only option for third-world countries. In Latin America at the beginning of the 1990s, there were already 183 million people living in poverty, and a third of them, 88 million, had reached "extreme poverty". Meanwhile, the structural adjustments required by international financial institutions prevented governments from investing in a better quality of life for the people. The deterioration of health, education and security systems, the lack of investment in infrastructure and consequent widespread unemployment was evident throughout the continent. In accordance with free-market principles, economies were unregulated, causing the destruction of many local industries and trade. Latin American countries entered the 1990s with the obligation of paying billions of dollars in interest on a foreign debt which itself amounted to one and a half billion dollars.

Five hundred years of European PRESENCE

A significant task for Latin American ecumenism at the beginning of the 1990s was the commemoration of five hundred years of European presence in the Americas. It was important to take fully into account the integrity of the first inhabitants, avoid triumphant talk about an "encounter of cultures", and admit openly and confessionally the oppression and genocide caused by Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of 1492.

CLAI began with a consciousness-raising process following its 1988 assembly in Indaiatuba. The
assembly's final message pointed out that "we are more and more aware of the immeasurable crimes committed in our continent by white (and Christian) people against other races. Countless millions of Indigenous have been killed throughout history, since the arrival of Columbus in these lands... Like the blood of Abel, the voice of the blood spilled by these throngs clamours from earth to God."23

Following the assembly, CLAI initiated a "five-hundred year programme" which led to a continental encounter on "Martyrdom and Hope" in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 1992, just before the UN International Year of the World's Indigenous People in 1993. This encounter was a rich experience for Latin American ecumenism, because it not only expressed solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples, but also acknowledged five hundred years of martyrdom and resistance by Indigenous Peoples in their own lands against the various processes of colonization and evangelization carried out by Europe. Cochabamba encouraged heightened awareness and education in the churches and in society. The churches rejected the marginalization and discrimination that affected - and still affects - the life of Indigenous communities. The Indigenous Peoples initiated the process, opening up a dialogue between the descendants of the conquerors, the native communities, and the black communities that came to Latin America through the slave traffic from Africa. The meeting formally expressed its support of Rigoberta Menchu, a Mayan woman from Guatemala, for the Nobel Peace Prize and made clear its solidarity with the demands of her people, the Kachiquel Quiche Indigenous People of Guatemala.

As well as affirming the rights of the Indigenous Peoples and the ecumenical commitment to support their struggle, CLAI made specific references to the major role played by native and black women in the life of their peoples. The meeting also set up a series of programmes addressing different situations and needs in aboriginal and black peoples communities and worked to combat racism and discrimination in society. Both the WCC and international ecumenical solidarity movements were present and witnessed the commitments and challenges raised for the ecumenical movement in Latin America.

An "Assembly of the People of God", held in Quito in 1992, brought together hundreds of delegates, Protestant clergy and Roman Catholic priests, laity from progressive hierarchies, base communities and the Indigenous and black movements. The assembly proposed new ways to overcome racism on the basis of broad and intercultural ecumenical dialogue.

Catholic-Protestant relationships

In 1990 and 1993, the ecumenical organizations responsible for the Cuenca meeting in 1986 arranged two encounters between Protestant and Roman Catholic leaders. The 1990 event took place in Kingston, Jamaica, under the theme "Foreign Debt and the Drug Trade"; the second was in Nova Iguacu, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on "Democracy in Crisis and the New World Order". On both occasions it was the Santa Fe II document which identified the issues: the growth of the drug trade, social violence and exploitation rooted in the external debt crisis, and the imposition of neo-liberal economic systems that limited the consolidation of democracy in the region.

In 1992, the fourth conference of Latin American bishops was held in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, again with John Paul II in attendance. Although it had been intended that the conference would celebrate five hundred years of evangelization in the Americas, this was rendered impossible by a strong movement against any form of celebration of the European presence in the Americas. Rather, the bishops requested, on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, forgiveness from both the Indigenous People and people of African origin for the abuses committed during the conquest and subsequent
There was no active ecumenical participation at Santo Domingo, as there had been at Medellín and Puebla in 1968 and 1979. The Vatican was primarily interested in consolidating its hegemony over the Latin American bishops, and the conference was largely marked by internal struggle between the papal representatives and the Latin American bishops.

The attitude expressed at Santo Domingo led CLAI not to invite Catholic observers to its own third general assembly in 1995, in the belief that it was time for the Protestant churches to set their own priorities for dialogue with Roman Catholicism. In an analysis of this situation presented to the CLAI assembly, Argentinian Methodist theologian José Míguez Bonino stated that "the Roman Catholic Church sees itself, at the end of the century, as the spiritual and ethical force that defines a new civilization. It accepts the dominant economic model, complementing it with a social doctrine that tries to humanize it and moralize it." Even though he was clear that not all Catholics accepted this fundamentally conservative position, Míguez Bonino had no hesitation in affirming that "this will be the dominant framework for Roman Catholicism in the near future". He was of the opinion that the changes experienced within Latin American Catholicism between Medellín and Santo Domingo showed that the concern for the political and economic situation had been supplanted by a concern for culture, which presupposed an identification of Latin American with Roman Catholic culture. For Míguez Bonino, this created serious difficulties for issues such as religious freedom - hegemonic Roman Catholicism impeding significant advances in religious equality. Moreover, ecumenical dialogue would appear to be limited since the Roman Catholic Church referred to new evangelical independent churches throughout the continent as "sects".

In spite of these insights, Latin American Protestant leaders were perhaps not prepared for the declaration of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the year 2000, "Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church". Walter Altmann, the Brazilian Lutheran theologian then president of CLAI, regretted that 35 years of ecumenical history was being ignored, and emphasized that "ecumenism is still vitally important because it responds not to a passing state of affairs but to fundamental biblical convictions". Altmann reaffirmed CLAI's "commitment to the search for unity, to persevere in an open and sincere dialogue among the Protestant churches and between them and the Catholic church, with the assurance that faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour unites us more than the divisions we still suffer".24

Evangelical, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal growth

Ever since their creation at the beginning of the 20th century, the Pentecostal churches in Latin America have been linked and committed to union in mission; thus, their involvement with the ecumenical movement has been seen from that perspective. Many are involved with CLAI and form an important sector of its membership. Some Pentecostal churches are also members of the WCC, and their theology and spirituality have contributed in a very special way to the life of the ecumenical movement. At the same time, the Pentecostal movement in Latin America has different manifestations and its churches have different origins. Consequently there are a considerable number which are not involved in ecumenical activities and others that are quite opposed to them. However, in all cases these churches have experienced continual growth. This has entailed consistently "new faces" of the church and new forms of relationships in society, in political, social and cultural areas.

In 1998 the Latin American meeting at Buenos Aires prior to the eighth assembly of the WCC observed
that the main churches in terms of initiative, commitment, missionary expansion and public presence are no longer those that gave rise to the WCC but rather the so-called churches of the poor in their multiplicity of manifestations. This form of church is oriented towards a "spiritual" and sometimes charismatic church which, although professing to reject the world, is a profoundly "corporal" church that generates health, life and joy amidst death.

It would be fair and more precise not to associate the term "neo-Pentecostals" with the Pentecostal movement; perhaps "New Religious Movements" would be more correct. Secondly, there are marked theological differences, even though in matters of ritual there might be common points of emphasis. These New Religious Movements construct their message from a theological perspective that assures converts their lives will improve radically on the material level. This approach has been called the "theology of prosperity".

The final document of the Latin American pre-assembly meeting stated,

“...The excluding and mercantilist system that predominates demands the prophetic voice and courageous witness of our churches. This requires new reflection that will lead the churches to act ethically in the public sphere. We are committed to witness against the current idolatrous system... In the midst of violence, fragmentation and despair on the one hand, and generosity, hope and the search for what is new on the other, we are called jointly to build a culture of peace and solidarity.”

The growth of Pentecostal and other charismatic churches in the 1990s caused the Roman Catholic Church to become even less involved in ecumenical activities since it perceived that its numerical majority and overall influence were being challenged. Mainline churches did not experience a growth in membership, but they witnessed the establishment of many new independent evangelical churches, the result of the work of local charismatic leaders or of American missionaries. Initially, there was little contact between them, but dialogue began in a number of local councils where ministers from different denominations met regularly to pray and study together, to share concerns, and to engage in joint actions like the "March for Jesus" that takes place annually in different countries. These councils also initiated a desire for legislation granting equality for all religions. In countries like Argentina and Chile, mainline, Pentecostal and evangelical churches formed associations to work on this issue.

The World Council of Churches in collaboration with CLAI sponsored a consultation with evangelical free churches in Quito, Ecuador, in 1993 and another with Pentecostal churches in Lima in 1994, thus opening up a new form of dialogue with churches that are not members of the WCC but have a strong presence in Latin America. Two Pentecostal churches joined the WCC in 1961, and they now represent 20 percent of the membership of CLAI. Ecumenical dialogue with these churches is an element in the process of relating to Pentecostalism both as an important expression of popular Protestant religious life and as a movement that is posing new ecclesiological, theological and pastoral challenges for ecumenism.

The theological level and depth achieved in the dialogue between Latin American Protestants was reflected at the third Latin American evangelism congress (Clade III), held in Quito in 1992 and organized by the Latin American theological fellowship (FTL). A total of 1080 persons from the entire region reflected on the theme "The Whole Gospel for All the Peoples from Latin America". They emphasized that evangelization can be separated neither from social responsibility nor from the historical processes taking place. It was also recognized that the theological work carried out by the FTL is a service to the churches instead of simply a dialogue with the academic world. As in the two
previous Clade events, the task of evangelization continued to be centred on witness, celebration and reflection.

**Developments in the 1990s**

When CLAI held its third general assembly in 1995 at Concepción, Chile, its theme was "Reborn to Living Hope", a theme which recognized important elements in the changes taking place in Latin American Protestantism - the growth of Pentecostal churches and the charismatic movement, and a deep commitment to the marginalized sectors of society. "Unity has necessarily to be celebrated as a concomitant expression of diversity, offering Jesus Christ as its witness, who summons the church, sustains it and sends it out to the world," the assembly's final declaration stated. This meeting reaffirmed the work carried out in the areas of ecumenism, evangelization and the struggle for peace.

In 2000, the fourth Latin American evangelism conference (Clade IV) took place at Quito, 1300 people coming together under the theme "Evangelical Witness towards the Third Millennium: Word, Spirit and Mission". It was organized jointly by the FTL and CLAI.

A significant contribution to ecumenical work during the 1990s was the creation of a "liturgy network" by CLAI to enliven worship life in churches in the region. Launched in 1991 and coordinated by Ernesto Barros Cardoso, a Brazilian Methodist, the network brought about a wide renewal of worship through new musical and liturgical resources, and an important exchange between the churches that both strengthened the identity of Latin American worship and opened new spaces for appreciating the diversity of its cultural and musical expressions.

A comparable recent development in several countries - albeit in another area - has been the establishment of Christian political movements and even evangelical political parties marked by direct participation of clergy and lay people. Confronted with this situation, the WCC has - with the main leaders of the evangelical churches in Latin America - encouraged a process of study, reflection and publication on the level of participation of churches and official Christian groups in political life. The growth of the Protestant movements in Latin America made this reflection process an absolute priority for the present missionary situation of those churches.

In the second half of the 1990s, two strong social movements - linked to the issues of social exclusion and the external debt crisis - were born. The first, "Cry of the Excluded", arose in Brazil in 1995 as an answer to the growing exclusion of countless people due to the neo-liberal structural adjustments imposed by international financial institutions. Millions of people took part in annual demonstrations for "bread, work and life" sponsored by this movement. Four Latin American personalities associated with the movement spoke to the general assembly of the United Nations in 2000: Bishop Federico Pagura, a Methodist from Argentina and a WCC co-president; Rigoberta Menchu and Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Nobel Peace Prize laureates; and Frei Betto, a well-known Brazilian Catholic theologian. They denounced the suffering of thousands, presenting alternative solutions to overcoming the situation of exclusion that abuses many people and deprives them of dignity and well-being.

In 1999 leaders from social movements and Protestant and Roman Catholic churches signed the Declaration of Tegucigalpa (Honduras) in which the external debt oppressing third-world countries was denounced as immoral and its abolition was demanded. This declaration initiated the Latin American
Jubilee 2000 movement, linked to the global movement of the same name. In 1998 and 2000, a "tribunal on the external debt", condemning the payment of the debt as unethical, illegal and politically unjust and indefensible, was convened. In Brazil, the tribunal's organizers included the national conference of bishops, Caritas, the National Council of Christian Churches (Conic), the ecumenical coordination of services and the landless movement; in Argentina, representatives of social movements participated together with Catholic and Protestant bishops, presidents of evangelical churches, many priests and religious, ecumenical organizations and the CLAI regional secretariat.

Continuation of work for peace

The ecumenical commitment to peace in Latin America concentrated during the 1990s on Guatemala where war had dragged on for over thirty years, and Peru where the extremist Marxist guerrilla group Shining Path wreaked havoc among the civilian population. Peace endeavours also continued in El Salvador where churches actively defended human rights, helping to bring about the signing of peace treaties in 1992.

In Guatemala several ecumenical organizations - CLAI, the WCC, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States, the Lutheran World Federation - joined forces to bring representatives from the military, the national revolutionary unity movement and civil society together at the same table to prepare peace accords. Roman Catholic and Protestant churches were also involved. In November 1993 the first peace encounter took place in Washington DC, followed by a second meeting in Guatemala in April 1994 and a third in Oslo in September of that same year. The statements released at the end of these meetings confirmed the advances achieved and the commitment of the churches to build peace in that country.

Early in the 1990s, the WCC, through its Human Rights Resources Office for Latin America, sponsored two visits to Peru where the rebellion of Shining Path and the war against it was costing thousands of lives and where human rights were regularly violated. On both occasions, human-rights abuses committed by the Peruvian state as well as by the rebel forces were considered. Local peace and human-rights organizations together with the evangelical council of Peru collaborated in both efforts.

Mandated by its 1995 general assembly in Concepción, CLAI launched a peace programme. This "peace plan", started in three countries divided by long-standing internal conflicts - Guatemala, Colombia and Peru - was actively to involve churches in each country's peace processes. The plan also encouraged evangelical leadership to develop training programmes on issues such as education for peace and human rights, administration of justice, peace mediation and pastoral actions for peace. It also advocated church involvement in social movements for peace. In Colombia, a fellowship of Christians for reconciliation and peace was formed, an organization representing evangelical and Protestant churches which became a qualified actor in the peace process.25

New theological emphases

The Vatican attack on liberation theology, embodied in the silencing of Leonardo Boff, eventually led to the suspension of his priesthood. Nevertheless, the Brazilian theologian continued to produce new reflections - using the methodology of liberation theology - on themes such as social democracy and Christian responsibility towards creation.

The work of a considerable number of ecumenical seminaries and theological institutes was strengthened in the 1990s. In 1988, the third CLAI general assembly approved the creation - with the
support of the WCC, the National Council of Churches (USA) and the Evangelisches Missionswerk of Germany - of the Latin American Community for Theological Education (Cetela) which brought together several entities. The first president, the American Eugene Stockwell, promoted its first Latin American consultation in 1991, with the support of the WCC programme for theological education. Cetela thus became a key referent for the development of Latin American theological reflection. It based its work on the Latin American identity and heritage, holding that theology is not an end in itself but rather a service to God's mission to the world through the church. In regular theological encounters, Cetela supported education open to cultural pluralism and interdisciplinary work involving anthropology, sociology, economics, gender theory and other sciences. Emphasis was also on the relation between theology and pedagogy as a means of renewing theological education in the region.

The five hundredth anniversary of the European conquest of the Americas prompted significant theological reflection, particularly with regard to the issues of repentance and forgiveness as seen from an Indigenous perspective. The 1990s also saw increasing work by women theologians and biblical scholars, as well as efforts in Indigenous ministries and those based on the African American culture. In all these areas denominationalism has been overcome, and ecumenical work has strengthened in such groups and initiatives as the association of theological schools, the theological reflection encouraged by CLAI and the FTL, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians and many others.

With regard to new areas of reflection, the ecumenical research department in Costa Rica together with Cetela have made important contributions to the study of such issues as spirituality, Pentecostalism, anthropology and culture, gender issues, neo-liberalism and exclusion. The meeting held by Cetela in 1995 in Colombia on "Abya-Yala Theology at the Turn of the 21st Century" (Abya-Yala is a Panamanian Indian expression used - instead of European expressions such as "in Latin America" or "Ibero-America" - to refer to the continent and emphasize the theological reflection of the traditional inhabitants of Latin America) included persons who have traditionally been excluded from theological work. In 1997, at the fifth theological encounter, Cetela and Eatwot reached important agreement on coordinating their work.

Participants in the Panama congress of 1916 may well have thought that their ecumenical cooperation would initiate a process for Latin American unity in Christian witness capable of influencing churches and society. They could never have dreamed of the tremendous process of renewal that would take place within the Roman Catholic Church and the ecumenical openness of that church as well as of many evangelical churches. Neither could they have dreamed of the astounding numerical growth in non-Catholic Latin American churches. The process which began in Panama remains ongoing, enriched by the contribution of people, movements and churches that hold an ecumenical vision integral to the Latin American identity with its cultural and racial diversity. All who hold that vision are led by faith and ready to commit themselves daily in situations of adversity that mark the life of their people. They struggle for new social relations based on justice, equity and solidarity. They give witness to the gift of God's liberating love, the love that calls churches to give way to the Holy Spirit so that the Spirit's unifying power may bring a new time for the reign of God in Latin America.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alvarez, Carmelo E., Celebramos la fiesta: una liturgia desde América latina, San José, DEI, 1986, 100p.


Quintero, Manuel ed., *Renaciendo para una esperanza viva: cronica de la tercera asamblea general*

Richard, Pablo, La Iglesia latinoamericana entre el temor y la esperanza, San José, DEI, 1980, 103p.


©2006 World Council of Churches