

# WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

## *TOO GOOD OR NOT GOOD ENOUGH?*

### A Consumer's Perspective<sup>1</sup>

#### *Four Voices*

It was Marlin Van Elderen who fired the first salvo of a new round of discussions on the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Van Elderen, the son of my retired New Testament professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, served the WCC for many years as an editor. He died suddenly of a heart attack just a few weeks after his article on the subject appeared in the pages of *The Banner*, the CRC's denominational bi-weekly.

It was clear from the eulogies that Van Elderen was a significant and appreciated force within the ranks of the WCC. Having read some of his materials over the years, I could sense the fine balance and good judgement he provided in an organization that has members from the entire ecclesiastical and theological spectrum. His was a classic Reformed input with its rejection of fads and extremes. His was a CRC input without the flag. The CRC has reasons to be proud of this son of theirs in the trenches of the ecumenical front.

Van Elderen argued in *The Banner* that the CRC should join the WCC. Of course, cynics could easily argue that doing so would be good for his job security at the WCC, that it was a bread and butter issue for him. However, Van Elderen was not a person to stoop to that kind of posturing. He knew the WCC from the inside after being employed by it for so many years. It was for that very reason that he wanted his church, the CRC, to join. He judged it good for both the CRC and the WCC. He felt that their interaction would be beneficial for both. He sought the best for the church that he loved, not the worst. He wanted it to grow and reach out, not to shrink into insignificance. He wanted her voice to be heard. His was the voice of daily experience, the voice of an inside staffer.

Van Elderen's article inspired a dialogue in the pages of *Christian Courier* (CC, Oct. 30, 2000) between two friends, Harry Antonides and Dr. George Vander Velde, both well known to CC readers. I will not repeat their arguments. Antonides' voice was the very opposite to that of Van Elderen. While the latter represented the voice of the inside staffer who had deep personal experience in both WCC and the CRC, Antonides' voice was that of the outsider with reference to WCC. All he could do, it appeared, was to argue on basis of a few documents he happened to get his hands on. His article

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<sup>1</sup> For background to this article, see our *Every Square Inch*, vol. 4, pp. 55-56 in the digital copy on this same website page, but p. 56 in the one single hard copy stored at Heritage Hall at Calvin College Library, Grand Rapids, MI, USA.

gave me the uncomfortable feeling of an established opinion that only needed a couple of random WCC documents for corroboration to settle the issue for his readers. The spirit of that article was not on the high level friends of Antonides, among whom I count myself, have come to expect of him.

Vander Velde, another friend of mine, objected that Antonides based himself on an inadequate range of WCC publications. He pointed to other publications where Antonides' criticisms of WCC were dealt with. Vander Velde did not outrightly suggest that the CRC should join the WCC, though I thought to detect a between-the-lines preference in that direction. If Van Elderen represented the voice of the *inside staffer* and Antonides that of the *outsider*, Vander Velde represented the voice of the *participant insider*, since he has long served within one of WCC's major departments, Faith and Life.

I offer my voice to this discussion as that of a *long-time consumer* of WCC publications and other services, especially of the department of Church & Society and of the Christian Medical Commission. During my 30 years as CRC missionary to Nigeria I have used WCC publications and other documents to great profit. While serving with the Institute of Church & Society in Nigeria I have often gratefully consulted with WCC staff of the above two departments on a wide range of issues for which my own denomination, the CRC, had little or nothing to offer. On occasion they would either send us staff to help in our projects or they would provide us with grants to bring in people from abroad. Indeed, I am a grateful consumer, though not an uncritical one. And my conclusion is...***Join it! Both will be the better for it.***

So, here you have four voices. Three of people who have had considerable exposure in various capacities to WCC and one person who is an outsider. The three positive voices love the CRC as much as the single negative one. Does that say anything to you?

### ***WCC and CRC: Two Mixed Bags***

All friends of WCC and of CRC know that both are mixed bags of positives and negatives, of virtues and vices. Both can easily be either condemned or praised, depending on which one-sided sources you choose to select. WCC has its weaknesses, some of which are not so pretty. Antonides brought up the issue of WCC's attitude towards the former Soviet Union. Indeed, that was a problematic issue, but one about which the WCC itself was very conscious and did not always know what to do about. It could be argued that it was captive to one of its largest members, the Russian Orthodox Church. It failed to move into the public prophetic mode it often adopts towards rogue countries. At the same time, it should be realized that it often struggled hard behind the scenes with that government, more than many people realize. It was often a matter of hard choices. I am not defending WCC's stance but I *am* indicating the difficult alternatives it had to face. I am not at all sure how, given those hard facts, any of us

would have decided these issues. The Wheaton Consultation, representing positive new developments among evangelicals, wrote in 1983,

All churches are faced at times with the choice between speaking openly against social evils and not speaking out publicly. The purpose for the particular choice should be obedience to the Lord...Wisdom will be needed so that the church will neither speak rashly and make its witness ineffective nor remain silent when to do so would deny its prophetic calling (*Mission as Transformation*, Edited by V. Samuel and Chris Sugden. Published by Regnum, 1999, pp. 271).

As Antonides well knows from experience, one keeps clean hands only when not involved in the ambiguities of life's struggles.

Similarly, the CRC is a mixed bag. I was once involved in a study of the relationship between colonialism and missions. I searched high and low but found as good as no CRC sources that were helpful. I looked everywhere, but when I finally stumbled on sources from either WCC or the International Missionary Council, one of the WCC's predecessors, I discovered that they had already covered the entire waterfront for many decades. I was a victim of CRC isolation and thus ended up trying to re-invent the wheel.

And that has been my experience several times. So often I engaged in studies for which I needed Christian input but would be disappointed by the CRC community. I would proceed to invent the wheel only to discover well into the project that WCC had already invented it. I was wasting my time until I woke up and would *begin* with WCC. No more re-inventions! I was freed from that time-consuming nonsense.

I experienced this in my studies of the external debt phenomenon, of wholistic health care, of the ethics of investments, of Christian-Muslim relations—in all of these I found much more help from the WCC than from the CRC. And I was frequently amazed to find how Reformed the approach of WCC was in some of these areas, though not all. I have often been deeply troubled at how the CRC community will ignore that same Reformed approach in its dealing with issues of socio-economic import.

### ***Economic Thinking in the CRC and WCC Contrasted***

Let me give one concrete example. I published a study about investment ethics under the title *Caught in the Middle: Christians in Transnational Corporations*. In this study, among other things, I devoted a chapter to CRC investment practices, both of the church's institutions as well as of its members. Based on my experience within the CRC and research, I wrote the following in the conclusion to that chapter:

Wealth... tends to stupify. I believe this has happened to some extent in the CRC. The considerable amount of money the constituency has for investments has stupified her..., made her insensitive to the causes of world hunger and made her easy prey for the... public relations efforts of [corporations] and their

allies. The CRC has bought into a system that cannot be justified from the Christian perspective.... The mentality of the middle to higher middle class has stultified the constituency's spiritual imagination and courage. The... revolutionary heritage of John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper has not been allowed free scope. The rationalizations of capitalism have taken over.

The demand for taking concrete ethical responsibility for one's investment is missing. There is an almost reckless abandonment of responsibility: Untold millions of dollars are entrusted to all kinds of... managers with either few questions asked or with little intention to follow up the answers obtained. It is largely an unconscious policy of leaving sleeping dogs lie. In this regard I judge the CRC and her constituency to be highly irresponsible. In the area of financial stewardship all the main doctrines of the church with social implications are ignored, neglected, bypassed. Denominational shibboleths about the Kingdom of God, the lordship of Christ, the application of Scripture to all of life, stewardship—they hardly function. In the matter of economic involvement, the CRC is in danger of betraying itself, the world and her Lord. Towards the end of that chapter, I gratefully affirmed that some rethinking was taking place that might move the church in the right direction.

But, I asked, "Why should a denomination with such revolutionary doctrine and with a college that acclaims itself so highly about its radical scholarship be so far behind others? Why should she not lead?" Indeed, why should she be so far behind the WCC on this score? Why be so isolated that its members are condemned to reinvent wheels long ago uncovered by WCC? It almost seems as if the constituency is kept in the dark deliberately. How often do *The Banner* or *CC* publish articles about WCC? This isolation has cost me much in wasted time and effort.

I suggest that the reason is not theology but our economic interests. The majority of the CRC constituency, certainly in the city where I presently live, has moved up into the higher middle class where WCC criticism of major world economic directions are now seen as a threat to our economic interests. The subtle influence of economic interest overrides our theology and spirituality without our even noticing the shift that has occurred.

Though my study was a personal project, it was not received with thanks from the CRC establishment. My immediate mission supervisor told me that the mission administration was upset about this publication. Efforts on my part to have the book reviewed in CRC publications or to engage the people involved in dialogue failed miserably. It seemed like a concerted effort to squelch this study. Only *CC* published a short and favourable review of it.

A major reason that the atmospheres within the CRC and WCC are quite different. One reason for this difference lies in their differing theologizing methods. The CRC tends to theologize in a vacuum, using only the Bible and other theological books. Often there is little reference to any specific socio-economic context, to the facts on the ground. It often sounds very profound, highly theoretical and abstract—and it is often very

impractical. But we love that kind of method and others tend to admire us for our scholarship. The more profound the theory, the more we are impressed with ourselves. The result is a very calm theology that makes no waves and sounds very calm, rational, profound and respectable.

The above picture is somewhat one-sided. There are some very good publications coming out of the CRC and I am proud of them. However, those are for practical purposes largely ignored in the economic life of the CRC community. That constituency keeps climbing the socio-economic ladders available to them, invests with great enthusiasm and keeps the builders of yachts and cottages busy. It is hardly affected by this kind of theology—and likes to keep it that way. Some professors at Calvin College who would like to do more relevant things tell me of the backlash that comes to them from the constituency through their students. When I, a senior citizen myself, offered to teach in the continued education programme of Calvin College for senior citizens, my offer was rejected. I was told I would be too radical for seniors! They would not wish to be disturbed, I was authoritatively informed. I should also tell you that the Provost sent me a letter of apology, even though the decision was never withdrawn.

WCC, particularly in the departments with which I co-operated, does theology “from the bottom up.” That is to say, it usually theologizes on behalf of the weak and vulnerable. It begins by gathering their opinions and by doing research in partnership with them. Only then does it move on to the Bible and other books. The result is that much of their theology is a theology of tears for the suffering and a theology of challenge to the powerful. It is never without passion and hardly ever “respectable” as far as the powerful are concerned. The very atmosphere or “feel” of their theological output is much more practical, concrete and overtly compassionate.

Hence, WCC has been in the forefront of external debt reduction campaigns. In fact, it was involved in such campaigns long before they became popular. A true Johnny-come-late, CRC leaders are still calmly demanding more time for research on the effect of debt forgiveness, almost too blind to recognize the urgency of this critical issue of suffering onto death for millions of people right now. WCC has been there years ago. Why should the CRC insist on re-inventing the wheel and thus prolonging the misery? Does she have a corner on research that the WCC lacks?

I am not trying to pit WCC and the CRC against each other. I am only emphasizing that the CRC can be made to look very black and the WCC very angelic. I could easily produce a long list of negatives about the CRC that would be enough to make many jump ship, a list much longer and more impressive than the one produced by Antonides about WCC. The CRC sometimes infuriates or embarrasses me. Yet I have stayed with her, because there are also many positive aspects that I treasure—though I cannot guarantee that I will stay indefinitely. Her continued proud and complacent rejection of the WCC eventually could do it for me. I am not sure for how long I can stand being forced to choose between the two.

It has always been a curious and distressing thing for me why the CRC feels so comfortable in evangelical circles while strongly opposing WCC. My studies and missionary experiences have long ago convinced me of very serious shortcomings of the evangelical movement. As a long-time missionary in Nigeria, it is my considered opinion that the CRC has seriously shortchanged, even cheated Nigeria by the strongly evangelical bent of our mission there.

Though Antonides has clearly expressed his negative attitude towards WCC, I wonder about his silence with respect to CRC participation in the evangelical movement. Why is he silent about participation in a movement that has obscured, ignored, distorted, failed to recognize, diluted, disgraced, and mocked central parts of the Gospel message?

Harsh words? Indeed. But they are not mine. I have lifted them out of a confession of the evangelical movement itself that starts with “We Confess That All Too Often—“ (*Missions as Transformation*, pp. 12-13). When you use such strongly negative term to describe a movement, you are dealing with what comes close to heresy. It could be argued that CRC participation in such a movement is a dark blot on her history. And again, at least in her missionary arm, her representatives in that movement consumed and accepted more of that kind of ethos than they provided leadership towards more wholesome and wholistic directions. Their acceptance of the church growth model makes this all too evident.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, a former Calvin professor now at Yale and a respected leader of thought in the CRC, expressed his deep disappointment with this church that has so emasculated its potentially powerful and radical Calvinist theology. He was an adult, he tells us, before he learned of the radical roots of the CRC tradition. In his *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* he wrote,

Learning of those origins has given me deepened appreciation of my own identity. It has also produced in me a profound discontent over my tradition’s loss of its radicalism. Why has it become so quiescently—sometimes even oppressively—conservative?

I have long asked the same question.

### ***The Bottom Line Challenge***

So, my request to Antonides and others who favour evangelicals but oppose WCC membership is that they explain their one-sided stand. Why have you so long tolerated these outrageous self-confessed evangelical aberrations while being so intolerant of WCC? Honesty and responsible leadership demand that you apply consistent standards in important issues like these. We need the influence of WCC desperately to challenge and correct our current almost unnoticeable drift into high middle class economic rationalizations.

When it comes to the WCC, perhaps the question is not so much whether the WCC is good enough for the CRC, but, rather the reverse: Is the CRC good enough for the WCC?