

Letters from Overseas

Kristine Greenaway Writes from Switzerland

March 2010

Dear United Church of Canada friends,
Today we in Europe mark the arrival of spring as we change to daylight savings time, and today we in the worldwide church celebrate the promise of rebirth as we enter the week leading to Easter.



The new General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Olav Tveit, is using the term “ecumenical winter” to describe the season which the ecumenical world has been experiencing in the past while. But Tveit does not see this as a barren time. Rather he calls it a time of renewal, a season in which much is happening below the surface in the fertile soil of faith. He sees ideas taking shape which will bear fruit in the years to come.

I myself witnessed signs of an “ecumenical spring” during a visit to Taipei, Taiwan, two weeks ago. A group of people working in ecumenical communication were invited by the Council of World Mission to gather to plan ways of pooling our resources in order to make the voices of the worldwide church better heard through our respective networks. We left Taipei with an action plan that includes creation of an Internet radio network which will link religious radio broadcasters such as the church-run radio station in Madagascar, the religious affairs service of Radio Suisse Romande (Switzerland’s equivalent to CBC Radio) and Internet radio stations in Taipei.

As churches seek to address human rights and social justice issues within our faith communities and in civil society, there is a common concern for listening to the voices of those on the margins and for redefining what ministry means when we take those voices seriously. Hearing those voices is vital to the authenticity and effectiveness of justice initiatives.

While in Taipei, I heard of the inspired and inspiring work of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) with the country’s Indigenous peoples. Associate General Secretary Sing ‘Olam, a member of the Amis people, told me of an initiative to create links between urban congregations and congregations of Indigenous peoples who have migrated to the city in search of work and better education for their children. The object is to create partnerships in mission where two congregations share one roof under which the Indigenous peoples offer their witness of faith and rich cultural heritage and the urban congregation (mainly the majority Han people) offer spiritual and financial resources.

As I listened to Sing's stories, I thought of the challenges that both Taiwanese and Canadians share in bridging cultural gaps and in overcoming legacies of separation between the countries' Indigenous peoples and those who arrived from abroad as colonists. Our countries have much to learn from each other that can nourish our spring of hope and rebirth.

I see signs of an ecumenical spring too as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) prepare to merge at the Uniting General Council (UGC) which is to be held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in June.

There will be strong Canadian First Nations and American Indian presence at the UGC. On opening day, tribal leaders from Michigan will formally invite UGC delegates and visitors to their land. Later in the week, there will be a day of encounter with Indigenous peoples in a historic park on the banks of the Grand River where Native peoples and early traders once met to trade. The celebrations in the park will feature a service led by Christian American Indians followed by a Pow Wow or "friendship dance." Throughout the UGC, there will be workshops on Indigenous justice issues, a keynote speech by an American Indian rights advocate, and an exhibit where delegates and visitors will be able to meet with local American Indians.

My work as Executive Secretary for Communication with WARC is demanding in this busy period leading to the UGC, but I have returned from Taiwan refreshed and encouraged by a vision of what can be done in partnership with Indigenous peoples worldwide when they are linked through the WCRC.

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Kristine Greenaway is a United Church of Canada overseas personnel associate serving with WARC in Switzerland. The work of this global partner and the work of overseas personnel is made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.

