

## Letters from Overseas

### Kathleen Stephenson Writes from Brazil

March 2009

#### Two World Forums:

#### World Social Forum 2009 (WSF) and the World Forum on Theology and Liberation 2009 (WTFL)

During the last two weeks of January, two world forums were held back-to-back in Belém, settled in 1616 by the Portuguese, on the south bank of the Rio Guamá in the northern state of Pará in the Amazon region. Support from our Mission and Service Fund enabled me to attend, representing both the United Church and CESE (Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço) where I work in Salvador, Brazil.



Photo: Wolf Kutnahorsky

#### World Forum on Theology and Liberation 2009

Approximately 600 theologians and students of theology from around the world gathered for the World Forum on Theology and Liberation from January 21 to 25, 2009.

The theme of the Forum—Water Land Theology: Towards another possible world—and many workshops and plenaries focused on the enormous global significance of the Amazon region.

It was exciting and challenging and a stimulus for discussion and personal theological reflection. Here is a taste of the forum itself: provocative presentations, opportunities for discussion, and many loose ends.

#### On Looking at Hieronymus Bosch's Haywain Triptych

In the first of two CAFOD workshops, Gerard Mannion, a British theologian and professor, gave a paper on the current global crisis and strategies for shifting from practices and strategies that exploit to global solidarity. CAFOD is the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, the official overseas development and relief agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

Gerard started by projecting Hieronymus Bosch's "Haywain Triptych" ([www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bosch/haywain](http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bosch/haywain)) on the wall. It was painted from 1485 to 1490. We looked together as closely as we could at the central panel of the painting, with a massive hay wagon surrounded by hundreds of sinners. Christ is in the sky, but only a single angel, praying on top of the wagon, sees him. The crowd, with the pope among them, seems to be pulled toward a journey to hell.

Clear messages that are relevant still! After that scene-setting discussion, our speaker talked about forces affecting society and how we interact with and tolerate each other. He talked, for example, about competition and exploitation of resources and people. He concluded focusing on two elements of the Christian creed.

His thesis was that Christians have theological resources to counteract forces that divide. In his very limited time, he referred specifically to *catholicity* and *ecumenism* as two of our "ethical and ecclesiastical tasks." He described catholicity as the true

mark of a global church and ecumenism as a force for drawing together and countering any narrow definition of self.

Gerard summarized with reference to Jesus' response when asked by an expert in the law, "Who is my neighbour?" "Church people must bind the wounds—even of the good but despised Samaritan—and make the road to Jericho safe."

### Live Simply So Others May Simply Live

Another workshop given by CAFOD introduced a program called Live Simply. The program was developed within the last few years as a practical response to Catholic social teaching, in particular as set out by Pope Paul VI in the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio: On the Development of Peoples* (March 26, 1967), written 42 years ago.

Live Simply has been effective in motivating young people in the United Kingdom to, in the Pope's words, "look hard at our lifestyles, to choose to live simply and in solidarity with the poor." The program is explained well at the Live Simply website ([www.livesimply.org.uk](http://www.livesimply.org.uk)), where tools and guidelines are readily available.

### "We All Live Downstream"

The morning plenary on the second day focused on water. Steve de Gruchy, an ordained minister from South Africa and professor of theology, spoke about theology, water, and particularly about sewage. Using real-life examples including the current cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe, he demonstrated his key point clearly: that "we all live downstream."

We inhabit one home, he said, this planet. We have no other place to put our waste. It cannot leave the planet. We must deal, he said, with our s\*\*t.

The Jordan River was his biblical and theological motif, flowing as it does from life (the Sea of Galilee) to death (the Dead Sea). God's gift of the Land of Promise, across the Jordan, came with extensive instructions about tending the land. Liberation from slavery carried restrictions. We are not free, as de Gruchy put it, to simply flush! We all live downstream.

Although Professor de Gruchy spoke eloquently in English, he did not use the polite English word for sewage. He used a shorter word and that apparently gave the interpreters a bit of a choice. And they chose to use a polite term for the majority of participants, listening to the Portuguese interpretation. However, the interpreters obviously realized, after several repetitions of the not-so-polite term, that the word choice was deliberate. So they switched to the more vernacular Portuguese word for sewage...

There was a brief silence among the 500 or so participants and then laughter and then head-nodding. Prof de Gruchy paused briefly and thanked the interpreters for using the earthier term.



## World Social Forum 2009

The following week was a completely different world forum experience at the eighth World Social Forum. Some numbers will explain the difference

- 133,000 registered participants
- 5,800 organizations represented
- participants from 142 countries



The forum was held on two university campuses linked by bus and by small launches ferrying participants between campuses. There were literally hundreds of workshops to choose from at any given time. On the first day, for various reasons, I did not get to a single one of the workshops I had selected. Either I could not find the right building or room or the workshop had been cancelled. Or I found the right building and room but the workshop had been moved to a different building.

In the end, I just opened doors, peeked in and if the group looked congenial and animated, I went in! And that system worked well. It also contributed to my eventual conclusion that the World Social Forum was about being there, often in mute solidarity, with 132,999 other participants: all of us representing many other people and all of us seeking to understand and resolve global problems. Pictured is a public witness at the forum.

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**Kathleen Stephenson** is a United Church of Canada overseas personnel serving with in Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço in Brazil. The work of this ecumenical partner and the work of overseas personnel are made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.

