

IN AWE MESMERISED IMPRESSED GLADDENED DELIGHTED



Rick Sarre Reflections

Delegate. Australia Church

I was in awe, mesmerised, impressed, gladdened and delighted.

I very much enjoyed conference, my ninth such experience. There were five highlights for me.

The first was hearing from the leader of the World Church Peace Award winner, Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT). Her name is Muriel Schmid. Her remarks at the Award ceremony (in receiving US\$25,000 from the Shaw Family Foundation) included this desire: "We are learning, every single day, how difficult and challenging it is to build partnerships to transform violence and oppression — our mission statement — and we are learning from the people who have been left on the side robbed and beaten by many systems of oppression." I was in awe.

My second highlight was the choirs: a Kansas City choir formed by Congolese refugees who sang at the Sunday Communion, and the Graceland choir at the Peace Award ceremony. Both delivered unbelievable sounds of joy. I was mesmerised.

Third, with the addition of Angelia Ramirez, the current Council of Twelve Apostles reflects the broadest diversity of nations and cultures ever in the life of the church. One morning, all six women apostles sat in the front row of the newly configured Council of Twelve. The conference assembly erupted with a standing ovation! The chair also noted that our Apostle Mareva

is the first non-native English speaker chosen as the President of the Council of Twelve; Dutch-born Wim van Klinken is the first non-native English speaker to serve in the Presiding Bishopric. Karin F. Peter is the first female to serve as the senior President of Seventy. Ronald Viera Lopez is the first high priest from Honduras to serve on the Standing High Council along with Isaac Bennett Joshua who is the first high priest from India to serve on the Council, and Vince Lewis is the first African American male high priest to serve on the Council. Lest there be any concern about a gender balance, I remind readers that three men retired from the Council. The gender balance thus remains at six men and six women. I am impressed.

Four, on the Sunday evening many antipodean delegates were hosted for dinner by Matt, Tere and Liam Naylor. We enjoyed a delightful meal in their lovely home in downtown Kansas City, along with former World Church secretary Bruce Lindgren and Carol Lindgren who were housing a number of Australians. I was gladdened.

Finally, emerging from the week's legislative activities came a resolution declaring a climate emergency, a statement against racism in all of its forms, and another strong affirmation of our need to support refugees the world over. I was delighted.

It is indeed an exciting time to be in the Church!

Leanne Moore Reflections

Delegate. Australia Church

The idea of attending a World Conference was first sparked as a teen by my grandparents' infectious excitement and inspiring testimony. I knew that it was something I needed to achieve one day. One driving motivator was hearing 'The Spirit of God like a Fire is Burning' in a much larger setting. Wade had previously visited Independence, but had not attended a World Conference. Our three adult children were fortunate enough to attend IYF and Spectacular events in their teens. Their excitement, subsequent baptisms and testimonies only further fueled our desire to attend a World Conference.

Along with Adele and Harry Fielding, we were fortunate to be able to stay with Carole and Bruce Lindgren as well as two of their friends from Seattle. One of the many benefits were our pre-legislative discussions, getting a deeper understanding and appreciation. Some observations were also made

about the overall smaller numbers of attendees compared to past conferences possibly due to Visas not being granted to attend, historic splits over Church theology, cost of living stressors, and/or by the push-back that is being experienced by many religions.

It was evident how financial pressures and decreased tithing have impacted current and future programs that the Church is able and willing to get involved in, but yet in every legislative session and worship experience, we witnessed the joy, love, peace and hope that is our Community of Christ. I am exceedingly proud to be a member of this democratic and inclusive Church that has learnt past lessons and endeavours to ensure that all voices are heard. I was inspired by the remote voting of the delegates in Honduras, which has huge implications for other countries, especially poorer nations and future



conferences. My inner gadget nerd, wished there'd been more opportunities to use the electronic voting device used to gather demographic information and help with counting when the room was equally divided. We were very grateful for the skill and thoughtfulness of Church leadership and staff in managing a conference with such a large number of delegates.

There were many important resolutions before the conference, but not all resolutions had time on the floor in the legislative sessions. The conference was indeed blessed by the spirit in which each member spoke to a resolution whether for or against. This is where I felt hope and joy the most. Hope that our church with a shrinking footprint could stand as a beacon for other faith-communities and nations to light their way forward through important topics such as Climate Change, Racism and Transformation; to demonstrate inclusivity through the embedded languages of English, French and Spanish; and to honour our diversity in song, music, testimony and prayer. It was reassuring, encouraging and inspiring that our Church and its members are still driven and determined in difficult times, to work together towards our united pursuit of peace.

I would like to briefly share my Communion experience. Due to Covid safety reasons every second

row was blocked off and Wade and I found it difficult to find seats. We ended up in the 'handicapped' area, on the far side of the auditorium. That label is an obstacle for me and threatened to hijack my Communion experience. I began to thaw eventually as I listened to the uplifting and thought-provoking messages from our Prophet President Steve Veasey, and as we were all asked to crumple up the bags that had contained our Communion emblems and a cacophony of crackling flames rang out through the auditorium, all was forgiven. Jan Kraybill began playing the organ and my much-longed for bucket-list moment erupted into reality. 'The Spirit of God like a Fire is Burning' was introduced in sections around the auditorium, building to a crescendo of united, harmonious and joyous voices. I was touched deeply and as is usual in these moments for me, the tears flowed and the sobs caught in my throat. The fire is still burning. The spirit renewed. Bucket list ticked.

Wade and I hope that sharing our experience of attending World Conference 2023 will ignite that spark in you to want to go and see for yourself. It was an experience of renewal and reconnection, and Wade and I look forward to seeing how we will grow in our response to the theme 'All are Called'. World Conference 2025 awaits. What are you called to do?

Harry Fielding Delegate, Australia Church

A Different World Conference

As I walked into the foyer of the temple complex in Independence Missouri, I felt somewhat like Tonto in the Lone Ranger movies (revamped version soon to be released). Looking at the Lone Ranger, Tonto asks, "Who is that masked man?" This was the question (applying to both genders) that I kept asking myself at this "Covid Conference" as masked "strangers" greeted me warmly and I had to guess who they were. Covid also affected attendances at conference sessions. Off-setting this, however, was the warmth and love that I encountered all around me and I was glad that I had come.

Some highlights of conference for me were:

- 1.** Recognition of the growing diversity of representation in the leadership councils of the church. I was thrilled to see the current representation of both females and representatives from "developing" countries now serving in the leading councils of the church: 50% of the council of 12 (including the president) are females. We also have female representation in the First Presidency and in the Presiding Bishopric.
- 2.** As a former president of seventy, I was quite emotionally moved at the setting apart of Karin Peter as the senior president of that council. I also shed a few

tears at the ordination of Angela Ramirez to the office of apostle. I had previously worked with Angela in the Dominican Republic and had watched her blossom in the compassionate and committed ministry which she offers

- 3.** I applaud the involvement of youth and young adults in many of the services. I particularly enjoyed the ministry provided by the Graceland choir.
- 4.** I appreciated the frank sharing of President Steve Veasey, and his commitment to a consultative and spiritual process to determine who will be his future successor.

In conclusion, I came away from the conference with a hope for the future of the church. Although I recognize that the world is in what sociologists term a "liminal period", where the old norms and ways of doing things are fast disappearing, but the new forms have not fully emerged, I believe that if we are tuned in to the leadings of the Holy Spirit, we can work with other positive forces in the world to bring about the Rule of Peace, even in the midst of the chaos and division that we experience every day. This is our calling and our challenge.
Shalom!

Adele Fielding

Delegate. Australia Church

Reflections on Conference

It is several months now since our World Conference experience of 2023.

We have all missed the opportunity to meet together, due to the Covid pandemic. While it is not yet over, it does seem to be manageable due to heightened awareness of keeping safe strategies as well as wide scale vaccinations.

Before conference began, we were at the Good Shepherd congregation, helping to assemble communion bags. This involved inserting an affirmation statement, a sector of corn tortilla (or rice cracker at other tables) and a small sealed container of water or juice, and sealing the bag with a sticker. Several different congregations in the area were working on preparing these little bags of communion emblems in a Covid safe manner. These were distributed to each participant at the Sunday communion service.

A significant highlight of conference activity for me, was sharing the home of good friends Bruce and Carole Lindgren with other conference participants. This year we shared space with Wade and Leanne Moore from Townsville and Kami and Bill from Seattle area. Very rich conversations took place as we all prepared and consumed meals during the conference week.

During conference there were information sessions during our called "Lunch and Learn". With sandwiches prepared at home or purchased from a range of visiting local vendors, we gathered in smaller groups to hear presentations, ask questions and try to come to terms with various issues being brought to the conference floor later in the week. I found these sessions very insightful, and also sharing some food with others.

A highlight service for me was for the Peace Award presentation, presided over by Rick Sarre. The Graceland Combined Choir performances were fantastic. The award of \$25,000 went to Community Peace Teams (CPT), co-sponsored by Community of Christ Church and Shaw Family Foundation (Canada).

Sunday morning's "Preparation for Communion" service, presided over by Susan Skoor Oxley, was a musical feast; meditative and interesting. Flute, piano, young person's singing group, a soloist and other congregational songs directed by Susan. I love the creativity of the services at conference.

Monday night we experienced the hospitality of Matt and Teri Naylor and Liam. It is always great to catch-up with Australians, past and present. Once an Aussie, always an Aussie.

Wednesday night the Australian Field reception was held in a local church building. Following this we attended a Camp Fire on the World Plaza at the front of the Temple. The leader this evening was very

energetic and selected both new songs and some of our old favorites to sing.

On Friday I attended the Prayer for Peace in the Temple at 1pm, followed by a short 3 item organ recital featuring the trumpet pipes. The final worship service and hymn sing was with Jan Craybill on the magnificent auditorium organ. How we love an energetic hymn sing accompanied by that beautiful organ. A very emotional closing to a jam packed special week.

My reflections of conference week have concentrated on the aspects that lift me Spiritually when I am here in Independence. It is these events and circumstances which have me looking forward to the next conference opportunity, to return to this place and its PEOPLE.

Feeling very blessed to have experienced this week together.





Vera Entwistle

Delegate. Australia Church

World Conference Memories

Brian and I had served as volunteers for the church in Taiwan for two years, and on returning to Australia to live close to our son, Aaron, the resultant lack of a congregation in this new location had a deeply depressing effect. Like many, I have struggled to survive on zoom worship. My response, therefore, to the World Conference was a deep gratitude that I had been able to be in attendance, however, due to 4 years of church isolation, the impact Conference made on me may be different from others.

I arrived in Independence a week before the Conference was due to begin and was fortunate to be invited by Apostle Art Smith to join the International Leaders in their meetings prior to the Conference. As I listened, I found this to be a steep learning curve on how the decisions we may make during the business sessions of conference would impact the church in other countries. The insights of people from many countries who reviewed these items was both enlightening and challenging. What seemed to me to be a simple item for our review, Marriage, would be extremely difficult in parts of Africa where polygamy is still practised, and how difficult it is to call members with strong leadership skills to any church office when they were involved in such a marriage.

A week later, on arrival at the Auditorium, the hugs and greetings of friends was an almost hourly reminder of how much I had missed the fellowship of a congregation and how, even in isolation, I personally needed to make a more concerted effort to stay in touch. Singing hymns with over three thousand church members was a morale booster I really needed, and there were times when I wept tears of joy. Over the years I have attended many World Conferences, and the business sessions were of vital interest, but this Conference I was far more aware of my emotions.

Due to Covid concerns, extra measures had been taken and wearing masks was advised but it was daunting to note on all doors to the Auditorium notices that guns were banned, and to listen to safety instructions advising what to do in case of gun fire.

The serving of Communion was very different. Servers held trays piled high with white packets, and each packet contained a small container of water with a tightly sealed lid, and a small portion of gluten free bread. After the prayers we were advised

when to open the packets to take communion. The rustling sound that swept across the auditorium as thousands opened their communion packets is something I will never forget.

I met and chatted with the new African Apostle, Catherine Mambwe, and on the final gathering, seeing her walk on to the rostrum, wearing a bright red glittering dress made me smile.

As the conference ended I felt a need to commit to attending the next World Conference when we will welcome a new Church President.

"God, where will your Spirit lead today? Help me be fully awake to respond. Grant me courage to risk something new and become a blessing of your love and peace. Amen."



Gail Robinson Reflections

Delegate. Australia Church

World Conference has been part of the foundation of my life since my first time in 1978, at which time I was confirmed. I have many wonderful memories of being moved by the spirit and simply knowing that our faith community is where I want to be. So I was filled with anticipation and especially looked forward to the connection with my friends and all the brothers and sisters I have come to know and love worldwide. Here are a few of my standout memories:

- The Spirit of God sounding out through the Auditorium during Communion on the first Sunday. As my dear friend from the British Isles said, “the spirit has been unleashed”.
- The High Priest quorum’s service for sustaining the new members of the standing high council was full of life-affirming testimonies and special moments. Kristi Woodward brought a magical ministry of music where she played the piano and sang “A Beautiful Noise”, which gives the message that ‘you have a voice’. How apt for this time in the Community of Christ – we all

have a voice and say in where we are going next.

- Presiding Bishop Ron Harmon bringing a powerful message at the Thursday night worship. To me the essence of the message was that the moments of “divine disruption” in our lives are often the spirit leading us to our new direction and challenge. Even though this can lead us out of our comfort zone, this has certainly been my experience and it is totally worth it!
- Our Apostle Mareva leading the Council of Twelve in the final sending forth service.

The Council of Twelve



Anne Bonnefin

Delegate. Australia Church

Reflection on The International Leaders Gathering and World Conference

A Fish Out of Water

I felt like a fish out of water. I sat down on the first empty seat I found, smiled at my neighbour and looked around. Had I chosen someone else's seat, or maybe I'd walked in on the wrong meeting? The presenter was speaking in French and everyone was nodding in agreement. A man on the other side of the room was responding in Spanish. The African men around me were impeccably dressed in suits and ties. The African women nearby lit up the room with their colourful dresses and the Tahitians stood out in their bright frangipani patterned clothing. They were all speaking French.

It took a while for my eyes to take in the room and see that all the English speakers were listening with headphones to the translators. I recognised a few familiar faces among the sea of strangers and relaxed. Oh boy ... the shoe was on the other foot!

Soon it dawned on me. What a privilege it was to be at this International Leaders Gathering and to experience what it meant to be in a world wide community. This was a new experience - it was usually the French and Spanish speakers who had to listen through headphones. Now it was my turn. The English translator's voice was sometimes unclear. Sometimes it dropped out all together. I had to listen with all my concentration and even then I missed the context or found it hard to follow the discussion. I had a new found empathy for my French and Spanish speaking sisters and brothers. It was like being the new girl at the first day of a new school. It was hard work!

I remember when we moved as a family from Sydney to San Francisco in 1963. Even though I spoke the same language everything else was upside down. This felt the same, my whole experience of church was turned upside down..... and inside I jumped for the joy of it! Inside I wanted to shake the hand of everyone in the room; to know their name and their story. Externally I took it all in silence. I was witnessing something very special in the life of our church and I didn't want to miss a minute. The lively singing, the praying, the drums and music unified. The discussion and dialogue challenged. My African, American, South American, Pacific and European brothers and sisters were so passionate, devoted and alive!

I learnt over this time of sharing and discussion that the perspectives of the group were just as diverse or even more diverse than I had experienced at home in Australia. Several of my pre-conceived ideas were smashed in those days.

Discussions about church membership and infant baptism and issues on marriage tested our understanding of the worth of all persons.

One passionate brother from Africa stood his ground "All people wanting to become church members should be rebaptised if they were baptised as an infant. It is a slippery slope." He said "What next if we accept this?" I could feel his passion for the church he loved. Its conventions and rules had been a ground he had built his faith on. Others argued how could we not accept someone's infant baptism if it was a commitment they had honoured their whole life. By having them re-baptise would this mean that they were denying the truth of their past?

Another fervent woman shared that a woman in her country had her husband decide to take a second wife - without her consent. "How can she be judged by her husband's actions that weren't of her making?" Was her priesthood call in jeopardy? Can she hold priesthood status while her husband has two wives?

The leaders tried to walk wisely between all the perspectives, giving time and respect for all opinions shared. These were real current challenges that affected the church members in Africa and around the world...

...Later issues about membership and marriage were debated on the World Conference floor in front of all the delegates. I felt myself responding silently - "But what about that woman who was being judged by her husband's actions." "What about that man who was being asked to deny the importance of his baptism that he had honoured all his life."

Had the earlier discussions at the International Gathering changed my perspective? I listened intently to the discussions on these topics, on climate change, racial justice, and awareness of refugees - and then asked myself "Given all I know now, has their perspective convinced me to change my vote?" It felt empowering to be voting from an informed position. This legislation would affect lives!

Moments of Blessing

We met in the green room before World Conference each day. Talked about what legislation would happen and the mood of the people. There were last minute changes and preparation and prayer. It was a delight to have been asked to be a part of the Moment of Blessing Team and to witness it in action. At a moment's notice the team would respond to the needs of the conference - with prayer, song, music and mindfulness - moments

of blessing. Our team sat together in solidarity at the front row of the Auditorium - cheering each other on - responding to God's Spirit, to those in leadership and the needs of the conference body - I think this is my most enduring memory of Conference - making new friends and laughing with old ones. This team was so present, supportive, encouraging, organised yet impromptu. Passionate in their discipleship they brought mindfulness and love in service to the conference. Their joy was infectious.

"The Moment of Blessing Team will lead us in grace." Said Stacey Cram. It was my turn! Do you know what it is like when you have nothing in your head and you are about to pray in front of a few thousand people? I had prepared a spiritual practice not grace!.... A deep breath Anne. Trust the words will come...Afterwards, Leanne Moore was kind enough to comment. "Your prayer was very Aussie. I appreciated it very much. " "What do you mean?" I asked. She replied, "Relaxed, casual, unrehearsed. It was refreshing." Her perspective was helpful to hear - I thought I'd botched it!

During another Moment of Blessing I had the opportunity to play my Shakuhachi flute. Playing it is about staying in the moment, allowing what is and, keeping relaxed. I tried to focus on giving ministry but it's not easy to stay present in a large auditorium filled with people all looking in your direction. If you are not relaxed you can't get a sound out of the instrument so I was incredibly grateful when the first note sounded. I had no pre imagined tune - I played a prayer from my heart. It was my gift to the conference and thanks to the superb acoustics the music filled the hall. Later several people came to find me. "Where is that 'young' woman who played the flute?" ... "I play a wooden flute too. " they said to me and even though they played the Native American Flute, I felt a real bond between us.

On my own?

Have you ever attended a large event on your own? Sometimes it can feel overwhelming. Sometimes there are unexpected meetings ...like when I met two young men from Croatia who turned up at just the right time and were able to help me with a social media request from Poland I had just received on our Australian

Facebook page. They offered an invitation to the man to join their online group in Europe.

Sometimes you just learn to be comfortable being on your own..... like some days when I went to the dining hall and, despite several attempts to gate crash tables, ate alone.

I haven't got room here to tell you of all the inspiring worships and workshops and meetings I attended. Nor of all the fabulous people I met or the energetic and soulful singing, drumming and music but sometimes just sitting in the empty auditorium before the day started felt like a liminal space so filled with awe it didn't feel empty at all. God's Spirit was in this space weaving wisdom and love and community.



International Leaders Gathering 2023