

3,200 attend World Methodist Conference

By PETER BENTLEY

About 40 laity and clergy from Australia attended the 16th World Methodist Conference held in Singapore, 23-31 July 1991.

Twelve people from this group also attended the World Methodist Council meeting as the official representatives of the Uniting Church in Australia. The Uniting Church (along with other United/Methodist-related bodies) is one of 64 Churches in the World Methodist Council.

The Council has a representative membership of 500. Altogether over 3,200 people attended the Conference and Council meetings and the many special pre-meetings and consultations.

The Conference provides interested people an opportunity to attend a large Methodist-oriented gathering for education, inspiration and fellowship.

There were regular large scale meetings, including the opening service at which over 3,500 people joined in the celebration of the eucharist and the 10 course banquet dinner for nearly 4,000 people hosted by the Methodist Church of Singapore.

There was a reasonable ecumenical focus during the gatherings. In one plenary session, Professor Norman Young (Vic) provided an insightful address with some timely ecumenically related comments.

Professor Geoffrey Wainwright (UK) reported on ecumenical developments at the WMC level, including the 25th year of Roman Catholic/WMC conversations and also the hope for dialogue in the future with Orthodox and Anglican communions (see separate story).

The preacher at the ecumeni-

cal service was the well-known Australian Greek Orthodox priest, Rev. John Chrysavgis (representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate).

The World Methodist Council is a self-governing body allowing representatives the opportunity to participate in the process of drafting and voting on resolutions. Resolutions were commonly on matters of procedure (which is in dire need of an overhaul!), social issues and matters referred from World Methodist organisations (eg. Federation of Methodist Women, World Evangelism).

The most controversial issues at the Council meetings were related to the Singapore Government and its expulsion of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) office in 1987 and the recent introduction of the Religious Harmony Bill which is designed to prevent involvement of religious leaders and groups in political affairs. The actual meeting of the Conference and Council at Singapore in itself had been a matter of controversy, particularly for the Uniting Church, and, of course, once everyone was actually in the country the questions were highlighted.

After much debate in the Executive of the Council, certain reasonably strongly worded resolutions were passed and were due to be presented to the Coun-



UCA Assembly President, Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood, celebrates communion during the opening service at the World Methodist Conference.

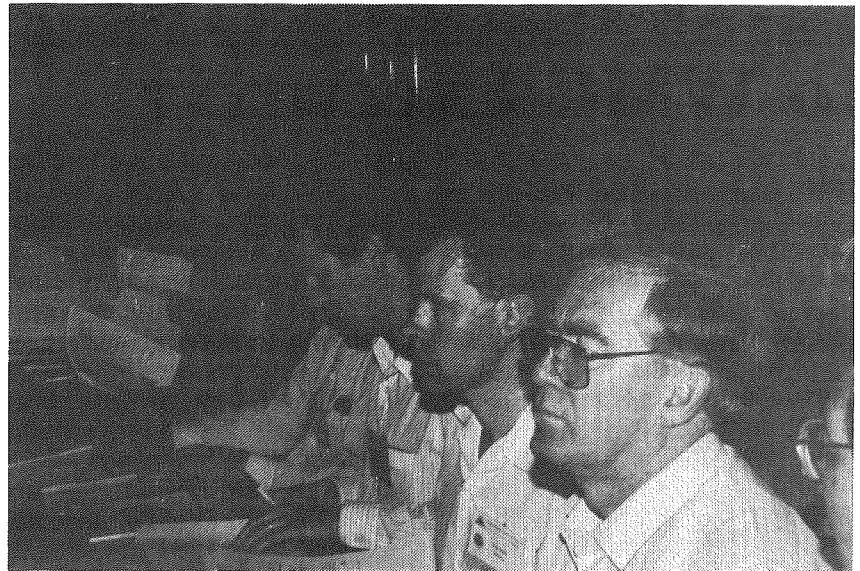
cil. However, due it seems to the premature release of the Executive decisions by the official Methodist Press Office, any opportunity for these to be passed was lost.

The *Straits Times* report on the Executive decisions so embarrassed the Singapore Methodist Church that their representatives voiced even stronger objections to the Executive Council proposals to express objections to the Singapore Government over the expulsion of the CCA office. In the consequent confusion and negotiations, a 'modified' resolution was passed by the Council, directing WMC officers to: "stay in contact with the leadership of the Methodist Church in Sin-

gapore, member Churches of the WMC in Asia, and the Christian Conference of Asia, concerning the expulsion of CCA; and with the Methodist Church of Singapore regarding the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. Further, that officers and the Executive Committee be prepared to work with the leadership of the Methodist Church in Singapore to do all that it can to promote religious liberty".

The gatherings presented an impressive picture of the diversity within Methodism. Purple bishops abounded in attendance, including the Nigerian Methodist Patriarch, entitled His Eminence, S. C. Mbang. This stood in contrast to the recent Uniting Church Assembly which assented to the wishes of the majority of its Church membership and voted against the introduction of Bishops.

The small groups — pondoks — enabled the sharing of a range of experiences, from living as a Christian in a country which does not allow witnessing to the Gospel, to some North American Christians who belong to individual Churches with larger budgets than many of the member Churches participating in the



Assembly General Secretary Rev. Gregor Henderson, Peter Butler and John Roulston during debate at the World Methodist Conference.

Council. The North American dominance is still obvious (they have over 45 per cent of the Executive Council membership), though there is a growing representation from Africa, Asia and South America.

For the next five years, the Uniting Church in Australia will be represented on the new Executive Council through its three appointed delegates, Ms Hilary

Christie-Johnston (Vic), Rev. Vijay Paul (WA) and the new President of the Uniting Church, Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood (ACT) and also through Mrs Betty Davis, who was appointed as the Vice-Chairperson of the Executive (the new Chairperson is Rev. Dr Donald English from England) and Rev. Jim Udy, who was re-elected President of the World Methodist Historical Society.

Report on Methodist/Catholic dialogue

Geoffrey Wainwright (UK) presented a report of the Joint Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council 1986-91 (5th series), 'The Apostolic Tradition'.

This report examined some of the issues which had arisen from previous joint studies, including the nature of the transmission, reception and teaching of apostolic faith and the nature of ministry (-ies) within the apostolic tradition. It did not have a detailed examination of the question of Apostolic Succession,

rather it touched on theological perspectives of the Christian Church regarding the apostolic tradition.

While a significant number of common areas of tradition and practice were noted, many specific doctrinal issues have still to be tackled.

In this report the issues were mainly related to the nature of succession and sacramental ordination and the forms of succession and oversight. Is ordination to be regarded as a sacrament? Geoffrey Wainwright concluded by noting again that the 'feasible

goal' was still "full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life" (from the 1986 report 'Towards a Statement on the Church'). He also indicated that this may take many years to achieve, a sentiment echoed by Very Rev. Msgr Kevin McDonald, the representative at the WMC for the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, who noted that the divisions between religious bodies are "long-term and deep-rooted". He affirmed the practice of dialogue as being an "absolutely essential attempt to look at differences that have separated us".