‘God in your grace transform the world’

Bishop Tom was among the UK delegates to the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 14-23 February. He joined nearly four thousand delegates, guests, staff and visitors to the Assembly and the parallel event, the Mutirao, a programme of workshops and presentations on the Assembly theme ‘God in your grace transform the world’.

Wendy Robins, Managing Editor of The Bridge and Diocesan Director of Communications and Resources, was a Mutirao participant. She writes:

During the Assembly various groups staged exhibitions around the campus and there were open spaces for people to come together and share concerns. The women’s space known as the ‘Beehive’, sponsored a ‘Thursday in Purple’ March, a protest about violence against women and children in which Bishop Tom took part.

The March, like other events and presentations at the Assembly, reflected concerns which as is as real in Southwark as elsewhere in the world and people in Britain will be reflecting on how we can overcome violence as part of the ecumenical Lent Course this year. The Assembly for its part re-confirmed its commitment to the Decade to Overcome Violence, which next year will focus on Europe.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu (above) spoke to the Assembly about the influence on the situation in South Africa of the WCC Programme to Combat Racism, in which our own Bishop Wilfred Wood had been much involved. His warm humorous presentation reaffirmed the need for an inclusive church in which all are equal. He also helped to lead a March for Peace through Porto Alegre.

Archbishop Rowan Williams, speaking to a gathering of Anglicans early on the morning of his day visit and then addressed a plenary in helping the Anglican delegations from around the world understand the workings of the Assembly and in steering the work of the Public Issues Committee.

This had been billed as a ‘Youth Assembly’ with great emphasis on the participation of young people. However, in the event, the young people there were dissatisfied and felt that they were not being listened to properly, especially when it became clear that the proposed 25% representation of young people on the WCC’s governing body would not be reached. They staged a silent protest with young people entering the assembly meeting with scarves over their mouths to symbolise their ‘silencing’.

At the previous Assembly a Special Commission was set up to consider the relationship of the Orthodox community to the Ecumenical Movement and the resulting discussions appeared to have affected the worship and prayer life of this Assembly, particularly on the role of women within it. The question of how we worship together through our differences seemed to reflect current debates in Southwark, and in the Church of England and Anglican Communion generally.

The question remains how such worldwide discussions can help us here in Britain and in Southwark in particular. The Bridge hopes to deal with some of the issues raised in future editions.

Wendy Robins (centre) helped lead Mutirao workshops on spirituality and the role of men and women in the church