

Obituary: Charles G. Richards

Charles G. Richards (OBE, D.Litt.), who died on 21 January 2001, was a critical but stalwart friend of WACC in the years after its formation in 1968.

Invited by Bishop Lesslie Newbegin, Director of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, to become director of the Christian Literature Fund (CLF) in 1964, one of his first tasks was to make a fact finding tour. His visionary report argued for the strengthening and development of indigenous publishing enterprises 'and the prophetic writing in which the author speaks of what he believes about the will and purpose of God regarding the problems facing persons, communities and nations.'

Michael Traber, WACC's former Director of Studies and Publications, recalls that: 'There was a joke circulating among African book publishers: "If your office is near a mountain, your project is likely to be approved by Charles Richards." Charles was not a mountaineer, but simply loved walking in the mountains. That was all the more surprising because he had a hip ailment, limped, and needed a cane. There might have been some truth in the publishers' judgement, because I remember meeting Charles only in places with beautiful mountains: Malawi, Kenya and Ethiopia.'

'It was on such walks in the mountains that Charles talked about his passion for books. He saw literacy as the key to any socio-economic progress and books as the great prize for the newly literate. His vision, therefore, was to publish follow-up material for the newly literate, which was also the theme of his UNESCO commissioned book.

Under Charles Richards' guidance, CLF opened up new frontiers of Christian communication through the printed word as well as opportunities for more and better development efforts. In the early 1970s, the CLF became the Agency for Christian Literature Development (ACLD). When it was proposed that ACLD and WACC should operate under one roof, he suggested that the two should plan an association concerned with Christian communication through different media – embodied in the 'new' WACC of 1975.

Dr Richards retired as ACLD director that same year. Before leaving, he talked to Michael Traber about his chosen successor, Bertie Manuel from Madras: 'That was the first time I had heard of Dr A. D. Manuel, who was to transform the ACLD into the print media arm of WACC. In a way, that completed Charles' life work, and made WACC what it has since become.

Charles spent the autumn of his life at the vicarage of his priest brother near Brighton, England. His hobby became gardening but his passion for books remained undimmed.'