

## Cees Hamelink honoured

By Rebekah Chevalier, Canada

WACC honorary life member Cees Hamelink first became interested in communication when he was eight years old.

Hamelink, who was awarded the membership 10 October at Congress, is an internationally recognized expert on mass communications and communication rights. In an interview, Hamelink shared his experience of growing up in a mainly Roman Catholic village in The Netherlands, where he attended a Protestant school. There was daily fighting between Protestant and Roman Catholic children.

The schoolmistress of his school asked him to solve the conflict between the two groups but gave him no instructions. So Hamelink talked to the students, telling them it would be better if they didn't fight. "I discovered the power of communication," he recalls. "I learned the power of talking and listening. One of the things we don't know how to do is to listen."

He later became a researcher, consultant and professor, working at various times for the Lutheran World Federation in Switzerland, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Latin American Institute for Transnational Studies in Mexico, and the World Health Organization. Among other things, he is currently a professor of communication at the Free University of Amsterdam.

Before becoming involved in communication studies, Hamelink studied first music, then theology. He maintains a passion for music and particularly for teaching music to children. "By playing in an orchestra I learned one of the most powerful tools to communicate is music" he says. "Music education is a way to communicate. Through playing together in a band children listen and learn to cooperate, and they have fun."

He currently works with a group of children aged nine to 11 called "jazz juniors." The experience of making music together helps them learn to cooperate and to be cooperative, not competitive. Hamelink advocates music education as a practical thing to do to promote peace.

His greatest passion is teaching students, helping them understand what critical thinking is. Hamelink notes that at age five and six children are open minded, but then they go to school and "education makes them lose their creativity." His work as a professor is to give them back their capacity for critical thinking.

Looking to the future, what does Hamelink see is the most critical communication issue the international community needs to address? To respond, he recounts his efforts to put communication rights on the agenda of the 2005 United Nations World Summit on the Information Society. "I regret that the churches were so absent from that summit," he says. "WACC, religious organizations and nongovernmental organizations have to make up for that. They have to give a signal that we take the right to communicate seriously." He would like to see religious organizations begin to lobby for a follow-up summit in 2015.

Hamelink would also like to see a concerted effort to help people globally learn how to communicate. "We have to learn how to conduct dialogue," he said.

Hamelink says that communication can play an enormous role in either escalating conflict into mass slaughter, or in de-escalating conflict. "While humans are a dangerous species, deep down we all know that it could be better in the world, that we have some responsibility to make it better."

In the end, working for peace, he says, "all comes down to putting a face on the stranger."

Hamelink was one of three people who received honorary life memberships in WACC during the closing ceremonies of Congress. The other two were Margaret Gallagher from Ireland and Horace Etemesi from Kenya.