

**Faith and Order Plenary Commission, Kuala Lumpur 2004**  
**World Council of Churches General Secretary's Presentation**

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*Members of the Plenary Commission, distinguished guests, sisters and brothers,*

The theme of your meeting is: "Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, to the glory of God", and I begin by thanking you for your *welcome* to *me* and, as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, wishing you all success in your meeting.

I hope to contribute to your work in three ways: first, by affirming the search for visible unity, and sharing my understanding of the role of Faith and Order and its place within the World Council of Churches; second, by giving my own reflections on the theme of your meeting; and third, by sharing with you four concerns which are especially on my heart these days.

### **I. The Search for Unity: Faith and Order and the World Council of Churches**

I believe your theme is full of promise - and challenge. You represent a vast variety of churches and confessions: ecclesial bodies some of which, despite all the marvellous ecumenical advances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are still divided. And you reflect, in your human diversity, a vast range of cultures, historical experiences, perspectives and understandings, things which all too easily divide us. And yet, because of your dedication to our common faith in our common Lord, you have committed yourselves to *welcome* one another, to look beyond your divisions and to work together for the visible unity of the church, to the greater glory of God. This commitment to unity despite all that has divided us in the past, is a miracle and it reflects the work of God's Spirit in our midst.

The churches are one in Christ. Faith and Order's vocation is to help the churches make their unity *more visible*, and to make their witness and service in the world *more effective*. This is not one ecumenical task among many but a central ecumenical task, which touches on *every* aspect of the churches' life and calling. This is affirmed in your By-laws, which give as the Aim of Faith and Order "to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ..."(3.1).

I know that Faith and Order has worked for unity in two closely-related ways. A *first* way has been reflection on the classic theological and historical divisions among the churches, the technical ecclesiological work for which Faith and Order is widely known.

A *second* way has been work on the divisions within the *human community* –between races, between men and women, between ethnic and national and economic groups – which impose themselves upon the life of the church as a community of human beings living in the world. And this work belongs equally to your vocation for unity, as your By-laws recognize in calling you "to examine such cultural, political, racial and other factors as affect the unity of the church"(3.2 (a)).

Following Faith and Order over the years, I have seen your growing awareness that both aspects of your work belong together, that they are *both* essential parts of the *one* search for the visible unity of the church. Thus all your studies – from the earlier work on baptism, eucharist and ministry, the apostolic faith, church and world; to the newer efforts on ecclesiology, hermeneutics, ethnicity and nationalism in relation to unity, on baptism, anthropology, on worship, on peace and the church's witness in a world of violence – all address the life of the church in its *wholeness*.

Unity is not one aspect of the church's identity and life, it *is* its identity and life. Thus the search for unity must impact also the churches' mission, faith formation, search for justice and reconciliation in a violent world, diaconal work – *all* the ways in which the church works and witnesses in the world today. And this is, I believe, the core of Faith and Order's contribution to the World Council of Churches as a whole: your insistence that the search for the unity of the church must impact all the work of the World Council, whether in mission, education, prophetic witness, or diaconal service. *The*

WCC welcomes this reminder that the visible unity of the church is central to its vocation as a council of churches.

But if unity is central to the understanding of mission, education, prophetic witness and diaconal service, then the opposite is equally true: all *these* are central to the understanding of *unity*. The search for unity must be *informed and impacted* by the churches' experience in mission, in education, and by every aspect of their life, witness and service. And this is, if I may put it this way, the core contribution of the World Council of Churches to Faith and Order: the World Council's insistence that the search for visible unity must draw upon the churches' experience in all the dimensions of their life. In *diaconal work*, for example, as we welcome and serve one another we also learn something of the meaning of *unity*. We hope that *Faith and Order can welcome this reminder* of the true scope of the visible unity to which Christ calls us.

I appreciate that you have responded to this "reminder" through cooperative work within the WCC – with the Mission and Education team; Justice, Peace and Creation; through work on issues of power and violence and on interfaith relations. We hope that Faith and Order understands such work as *complementary* to its classic work on the theological, historical and human factors that divide the churches, that you see such cooperative work as an enrichment for your work as a whole.

May I invite you to think of Faith and Order's life within the World Council in terms of your own theme of *welcome*. I invite you to think of the mutual interaction among the various teams and streams within the World Council as a mutual *welcoming*, as teams respond in their distinctive, but inter-related, ways to the challenges facing the churches today. We are learning together, through this interaction, the true breadth and depth of the one ecumenical movement. And in the process, we are learning about *welcoming* one another in Christ.

## **II. The Plenary Commission Theme: "Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, to the Glory of God"**

In the second part of my presentation I want to offer some reflections on your theme. *First*, I want to stress that the notion of *welcome* is a very powerful and nurturing one to me personally.

*Karibu; Karibu tena; Karibia*. These are words used on a daily basis in Kenya, Tanzania and other Swahili-speaking countries of East and Central Africa. But the concept is applicable in all other parts of Africa. *Karibu* is the word used to welcome a guest, but it is also used in bidding the guest farewell, *Karibu tena*. The word "welcome" is a poor English equivalent of *Karibu*. For *Karibu*, while it is indeed the word used to welcome people, also invites someone to come closer for dialogue. The dialogue is about the personal well-being of the immediate subject; but it is also about the health and well-being of the guest's household members. The dialogue will also include concerns about the state of one's livestock, and even the crop in the field. But that is only the introduction, or the warming up, for dialogue on even deeper matters about life. For that purpose one is called to *Karibia*, to get even closer, and now for a real palaver.

Through palaver we enter into ethical discourses, especially on what is to be done in response to what is shared after one is told *Karibu*. The whole idea behind *Karibu* is to encourage mutual sharing of both joys and problems. But it is also about seeking together for solutions to the problems. It denotes the personal responsibility between individuals as expected by the community. *Karibu* is part of that African heritage which requires each individual to be a welcoming person within the community that is itself a welcoming community. This is part of the communitarian ethic which emphasizes that the individual is always bound to reflect on what is beneficial to self, to the neighbour and to the whole community, as well as to what leads to participation in the common, lasting good for all.

In the context of the communitarian ethic, the reciprocal relationship between the community and the individual must be stressed. An individual may not opt to live outside the norms set by the community, because to be is to be in good relationship with everyone else in the community. You have the pleasure of saying *Karibu* to everybody, including and especially the stranger, because the same is reciprocated. This "economy of affection" minimizes the anxiety on the part of the members of the community, individually and severally.

Against the backdrop of growing xenophobia and an evolving enemy-image in many parts of the world, humanity will be best served by nurturing the concept of *Karibu*, which considers the act of welcoming a stranger to be a *blessing*. In a fragmenting world where suspicion and hatred, along with exclusion and rejection, characterise human behaviour and relationships this Commission meeting on the theme of hospitality is both timely and appropriate. The ecumenical movement has responded decisively, with sensitivity and creativity, to major crises in the world during the past century. This attempt towards a “theology of hospitality” may help the ecumenical movement identify concrete, effective ways of engaging with the new realities and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Your theme is a call to recapture a form of discipleship which is often set aside in the search for a sense of identity in our world of increasing plurality. It points to the need to expand the scope of our world views, theological frameworks, ecclesiastical boundaries, perceptions of others and even our self-perceptions, to experience what God has done in Jesus Christ. The Christological character of the theme must be noted - God’s saving act in Christ is one of welcoming, receiving and accepting us despite our particularities. The theme also calls us to repent for our failure to reciprocate God’s goodness as we relate to one another, and for viewing and presenting the boundless grace of God within the narrow confines of dogma and tradition. The theme shows the need to transform all *structures* of relationships - from the larger to the local, from the structural to the deeply personal.

And now a second comment on your theme. I am convinced that this theme, as developed by Paul especially here in Romans, is very helpful – but also challenging – for the churches today. I am much struck by the fact is that it is *Christ’s* welcome we are called to embody and emulate: “Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you”, says Paul.

Thus we are not called to offer “the welcome of the world”, the *usual* welcome extended mainly to those with whom we feel comfortable, who look or think or act much as we do. How much of the “welcome” we offer to others is really a matter of reinforcing our own values, and our own security?

But in offering *Christ’s* welcome, we enter another world of understanding and action. Consider with me for a moment: *whom* did Christ welcome? Besides his disciples and followers – already a mixed bag of humanity! – he welcomed the poor, the outcaste, the Samaritan woman, the sinner. And those whom he welcomed, he challenged and called to a new community of commitment and service: no one remained the same, after receiving Christ’s welcome. This community was based not on the likes and dislikes of its members, but on the fact that *Christ* had welcomed them, in all their diversity, and called them as his own. Christ’s welcome *challenges* our comfortable ways! With *Christ’s* welcome as their model, the churches are challenged to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human and to live in a new community of common confession, worship, witness and service. Dare we ask: what does this mean for our understanding of *visible unity* today - and how does this impact the churches’ search for visible unity?

Certainly it has profound implications for how we understand the church’s life and witness in the world today. Because they embody Christ’s welcome and not the world’s welcome, the churches will sometimes *challenge* the world and its ways. This is true not least of the dominant economic and cultural development shaping the world today, namely the increasing “globalization” of commerce and communication.

Our complaint is not with developments which benefit humanity and improve the quality of life on this planet which God the creator has made. But since we are called to offer *Christ’s* welcome, we cannot accept economic and political systems which favour particular groups over others, which reserve the world’s resources for privileged groups at the expense of others, and which increase the gap between those who “have” and those who “have not”. We challenge movements which offer the world’s “welcome” - and that for only a few - dividing humanity and *excluding* groups which are not considered “fit” economically.

Against these “principalities and powers” the churches are called to offer a radically different *welcome*, one which nurtures the community of faith in its common confession, praise, life, witness and service. We have much to learn from one another, as we exercise Christ’s welcome of one another despite all our differences of history, conviction and culture. We have much to learn from our work together in theological reflection, in common witness and diaconal service. Such a *welcome*

could indeed be the basis of a genuine search for the visible unity of the church, a unity *visible* for all the world to see!

### III. Aspects of Welcome: Four Areas of Special Concern

In the third and final part of my presentation, I would like to introduce four concerns which are on my heart and mind these days. All are important as we look forward to the next stages of the ecumenical movement; and they are all related to your theme of *welcome*.

As a *first* area of concern, I invite you to reflect on your theme in relation to *another* which will occupy the churches, and the ecumenical movement, over the next months: the theme of the World Council of Churches' 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly: "God, in your Grace, Transform the World". What creative links can you draw between Christ's welcome, extended to one another for the glory of God, and God's transforming grace, active in the world?

To approach this another way: how does the question of *visible unity* relate to the theme of the Assembly? Can you help us understand how the visible unity of church is related to God's grace, to God's transforming activity in the world? One approach would start from our calling to be God's "co-workers" in the transformation of the world. Can we affirm that only as we *welcome* and work *with one another*, experiencing and expressing our unity in Christ, can we truly work *with God* on behalf of God's transformation of our selves and our world? If that is true, then your theme of welcome can make a rich contribution to the next World Council Assembly. I look forward to hearing the results of your explorations!

My *second* concern is the need for a faithful and creative process to *receive* – even *to welcome*, in the sense of your theme - the Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches. There are many good reasons for welcoming this Report. It can be read both as an affirmation of, and as a challenge to, the Faith and Order Commission's agenda and work. It challenges you by sharpening fundamental ecclesiological questions and, at the same time, invites you to deal with these questions. I hardly need to stress the importance of matters like the ecclesiological self-understanding of WCC member churches, or the whole spiritual and ecclesial reality of praying together.

I mention three positive points. In spite of all the tensions, the Special Commission confirmed that the issue of unity constitutes the heart of our fellowship: WCC membership is described as giving an account to each other of what it means to be the Church, articulating what is meant by "the visible unity of the church", and expressing how member churches understand the life and witness they share *through their membership in the WCC*.

Furthermore, the Special Commission affirmed that ecclesiological issues are at stake in *all* the areas it investigated: the response to social and ethical issues, common prayer at WCC gatherings, matters of membership and representation, as well as how decisions are made.

Finally, the Special Commission recommended a substantial institutional change, a real transformation of the Council's institutional culture. Thus the proposal for a shift to the consensus method of decision-making is presented with theological and spiritual, rather than institutional, arguments: the aim is not for one to "win" a debate but for all to exercise a mutual submission, seeking to understand and express together "what the will of the Lord is" (Eph 5:7). Similarly, the proposal for new theological criteria of memberships aims at strengthening the ecclesial and spiritual character of the ecumenical movement, and of the churches' togetherness in the Council.

Thus it is important to promote understanding of the Special Commission, and to face its implications confidently. These do not respond exclusively to Orthodox concerns, but are vital to the entire ecumenical fellowship: it is the nature of our "welcome" which is at stake.

My *third* concern is related to ecumenical formation. This issue is familiar to Faith and Order, for you are well known for your practice of *welcoming* "younger theologians" and seeking to raise up a new generation committed to the visible unity of the church, and to the whole ecumenical movement. I celebrate that!

We know that the classical “training places” for ecumenical leadership, such as the Christian student movements, no longer meet this need. But my concern is a more radical one: I fear we are faced with the loss, in all cultures, of *fundamental information* about the Christian faith as a viable option for men and women today. Regions such as Europe, where we could count on at least a “cultural awareness” of the faith, are now becoming mission fields full of persons who have never heard of the faith. In many places today we can no longer assume the religious, much less Christian, awareness which existed 20 years ago. We will soon need not *ecumenical* formation, but *faith* formation, and that at the most basic level.

So I invite you, as a Commission with a long history of handing on the faith to the next generation, to wrestle with this issue. What is the relation of theological reflection to basic formation in the faith? How can *faith formation* be a fundamental part of our theological reflection? And how can the search for visible unity respond to the urgent need for faith formation today?

My *fourth* and final concern arises from the reality of religious pluralism today. This is not a new phenomenon; but through increased travel, communications, and economic forces we are increasingly aware of the diversity of religious belief and practice. It becomes more and more crucial for persons and cultures with different faith convictions to find ways of understanding one another, and preventing their differences from leading to tension or conflict.

This has everything to do with your theme of *welcoming* one another - and with your vocation for the visible unity of the church. A host of questions arise: How is *Christ's welcome* related to the whole world God has made? Are there limits to our welcome? How can our work foster a *positive* understanding of the visible unity of the church? How can we best affirm the gift of *unity* in Christ, free of defensiveness and without defining ourselves negatively, over against “the other” who is different from us?

These are very complex and sensitive matters, but churches today must do their best to face them faithfully. Your readiness to meet in Asia, where the reality of religious pluralism is perhaps most evident, shows that you recognize the importance of these issues and how they need to become part of own theological reflection.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In concluding, I want to return to your theme of *welcome*. Earlier this year, in my first trip as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, I returned to the village where I was born, to Meru in Kenya. And there, in that place where I am most at home, I was welcomed by those to whom I belong.

In our calling and in our common baptism, sisters and brothers, we belong to Christ; and because we all belong to him, we belong to one another. It is in that common belonging that, despite all our differences, we can truly “welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, to the Glory of God”. May you have the courage to work for a *unity of the church* which makes *Christ's welcome* visible, for all the world to see!