

World Council of Churches
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

*Faith and Order Plenary Commission
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DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Introduction

With this meeting of the Plenary Commission I come to the end of my period of service as Director of the Faith and Order Secretariat. Let me try to identify some of the significant events which have taken place during the past nine years. There have been a number of significant agreements between churches at national and regional levels to move to the manifesting of church fellowship¹. During this period a number of church union processes have come to fruition thus increasing the number of churches who have entered union on the way to seek greater unity with others in their context². Regional and national councils of churches have grown and developed, and a number which did not have Faith and Order departments in the past are seeking to establish those³. At international level, more and more bilateral dialogues have produced agreed statements or are about to conclude a phase of their work together⁴.

In this regard, a significant development has been the signing of the Joint Declaration between the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran Churches through the Lutheran World Federation (1999), on the basis of their bilateral report on the doctrine of justification. Another important development was the establishment of the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM) to stimulate the implementation of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations in different parts of the world. A significant number of processes have also emerged in this period to seek to widen the participation of churches in the ecumenical movement, particularly so that Pentecostal and Evangelical Groups might feel comfortable in ecumenical discussions⁵.

In the last decade, the World Council of Churches has undergone radical change. Prior to the Eighth Assembly at Harare in 1998 considerable attention was paid to the analysis of the nature of the WCC in the Common Understanding and Vision process. Through this, the Constitution of the WCC was revised and its character as a "fellowship of churches who call each other to the goal of visible unity" emphasised. In this process important impulses from the Ecumenical Patriarch and from the Roman Catholic Church, through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, were received. In the light of this process, a reorganisation of the WCC and of its work took place⁶.

During the decade under review, Pope John Paul II issued his Encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), emphasising the commitment of the Roman Catholic Church to the search to manifest

¹ This development is evident in the Porvoo, Reuilly, Waterloo, Called to Common Mission agreements amongst others in this period.

² Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (PCSA and RPCSA), 1999; Church of Jesus Christ in Lairam (Baptists & Church of Jesus Christ, North-East India), 1999; United Reformed Church (Congregational Union of Scotland and URC in the UK), 2000; Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC, 9 denominations, from the Consultation on Church Union) (USA), 2002; Union of Evangelical Churches in the Evangelical Church in Germany (UEK in the EKD) (Formed from the EKU and The Arnoldshainer Konferenz (Akf), Germany), 2003; Communion of Churches in India (CSI, CNI, Mar Thoma, 2004; Protestant Church in the Netherlands (NRC, RCN, ELC), 2004.

³ E.g. the All Africa Conference of Churches.

⁴ See J. Gros et al (ed), Growth in Agreement Vol II Faith and Order Paper No. 187, Geneva, WCC 2000 and the chart of bilateral dialogues completed or in progress since 1998 on the Faith and Order website.

⁵ See the Minutes of the WCC Central Committee for references to the discussion on the establishment of the Forum.

⁶ See The Ecumenical Review 49 (I) 1997.

visible unity, and setting the whole discussion of unity within the framework of the holiness of the Church. With this encyclical, Pope John Paul II departed from the style of previous such documents by citing the work of Faith and Order (normally Encyclicals only cite and quote previous magisterial teachings) and by offering to open up a discussion on the nature and practice of the Petrine office itself⁷. During the celebrations of the Millennium in Rome, there were also a number of significant acts - focusing on unity and the reconciling of memories.

Of course, there is much more that could be referred to as of significance for ecumenical advance at local, national, regional, and inter-church level - the growth in number of ecumenical parishes; the proliferation of bilateral arrangements between parishes, diocese or presbyteries of one church with those of others both in the same country and in other parts of the world; the increasing number of significant symbolic gestures between leaders of churches, and the desire of many groups and churches which had not previously found it possible or desirable to engage in what were perceived as ecumenical activities to engage with others ecumenically now.

However, during this same decade, there were plenty of discouraging signs. For financial reasons, the World Council of Churches has gone through three different organisational restructuring processes, reducing staff numbers by half, and putting in jeopardy or suspending some of its work. There is an increased confessionalism among the churches⁸, which has led to the creation of denominational institutions, particularly in the area of theological education, where hitherto ecumenical theological education took place. Issues of ethics, amongst others, have now placed a greater strain on bilateral dialogues and agreements and relationships, leading in the case of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations to a delay and re-scheduling of the work of the International Commission on Unity and Mission. Throughout this period has also occurred an expression by Orthodox Churches of their dissatisfaction in the World Council of Churches and the subsequent establishment of the special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC and an examination of the ethos of the WCC - in its style of decision-making - of membership in the WCC, of ethical discussions, and of basic understanding of baptism and the nature of the Church among member churches. The Special Commission has now produced its report, which takes seriously all the questions of disquiet expressed by the Orthodox Churches⁹. While there is a perceived desire to continue to move forward ecumenically, it is not yet clear how far Orthodox Churches and the other member churches of the WCC have been able to "receive" the Special Commission Report.

In this period of the proliferation of ecumenical dialogues at international, regional and national level, the complexity of striving to maintain and perceive coherence has been evident. Partners of one bilateral conversation are inevitably engaged in dialogue with other partners, and reaching agreement. In most cases it is different representatives of the churches who are engaged in the dialogues. Is coherence being maintained? Is the same vision of unity being sought? The very complexity, which is a result of the culture of dialogue itself, has at times led to confusion and to a questioning of the enterprise itself.

Faith and Order since Moshi

During the past decade, the Faith and Order Commission has continued its patient work to assist the churches to call each other to the goal of visible unity. Much of the agenda which has been addressed emerged from the Responses from the Churches to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* - issues of hermeneutics, of baptism, of worship, of ministry - especially concerning episcopate and episcopacy, authority, and ordination, and of ecclesiology - many churches asked that study be undertaken on this question because they discerned an implicit ecclesiology underlying BEM which they felt needed to be explored. Thus the frequent question to Faith and Order from groups, universities and churches leaders - whatever happened to BEM? - is answered by our continuing agenda, and also by the methodology adopted for the ecclesiology study, and by the fact that BEM influenced churches to move into new dimensions of recognition and common decision-taking.

⁷ Pierre Duprey, "The encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* and Faith and Order", in Colin Podmore (ed), *Community - Unity - Communion. Essays in honour of Mary Tanner*, London, Church House Publishing 1998.

⁸ H.E. Cardinal Kasper - address to the Plenum of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 2003.

⁹ See *The Ecumenical Review* 55 (1) 2003

While in this period, there has been an evident continuation of work on the responses to BEM, there have also been new issues on our agenda - e.g. anthropology - and new areas whereby Faith and Order has worked in collaboration with other teams in the WCC. The Ecclesiology and Ethics project¹⁰ was the first of a number of such ventures - the study on Ethnic Identity, National Identity and the Search for Unity; the consultation on Ecclesiology and Mission with members of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (2000); the work with the members of the Ecumenical Disabilities Advocacy Network (EDAN) to produce the Interim Statement: The Church of All and for All; the reflections in the Council on issues of human sexuality; the work with the Decade of Overcome Violence; and two different projects on religion - the Visser't Hooft Memorial project on Religion and Violence, and the Central Committee initiated study on Theological Reflection on Religious Plurality, along with the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism and representatives of the Inter-Religious Dialogue working group. This activity of inter-team projects emerged at the Harare Assembly as the guidance from the Assembly as to the style of working in the WCC, and it has clearly through an intricate process of ensuring links to our own major studies helped to provide consistency and coherence on these questions in the Council.

If the issues identified above have by and large provided the agenda of Faith and Order - issues emerging from the continuing agenda of BEM and those from collaborative processes, which have been recommended by the Harare Assembly or various Central Committees - the Commission has also been active in assisting the Christian World Communions to reflect on bilateral dialogues - through the Bilateral Forum, held every three years or so and organised on behalf of the General Secretaries of Christian World Communions¹¹. It has provided a similar service for United-Uniting Churches through the organisation of a consultation for them¹². There is also continual work with the Joint Working Group between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, work with the Special Commission, and developing relations with Regional Ecumenical Organisations.

Lausanne 75th

The work and witness of Faith and Order was celebrated by the WCC Central Committee in 2002 in a special day of events organised with the local churches in Lausanne Cathedral. The festive events began with an eulogy and prayer led by Rev. Dr Günther Gassmann at the grave of Bishop Charles Brent in Lausanne cemetery. This was followed by a colloquium in the University where the First World Conference on Faith and Order had been held in 1927. A conference room designed to hold some two hundred people had to accommodate twice that number. Presentations were made by Lukas Vischer, Mary Tanner, Anastasia Vassiliadou and on behalf of Cardinal Kasper. Greetings from a number of churches were read out. The final event of this celebration was the lengthy but moving service in the Cathedral Church, where H.B. Anastasios, Archbishop of Tirana and all Albania preached¹³. The service had been drawn up by a committee representing all the Churches in Lausanne and the Canton of Vaud and the Faith and Order Secretariat. The Cathedral was overflowing with people. The banners of Faith and Order were offset by the colours of the rainbow in the congregation. The music was led by a specially trained choir, and by other choirs. This was an event which showed the importance of the work done by Faith and Order for the life and witness of the local church. The Lausanne churches had moved into a covenant relationship to work for unity, to celebrate real but imperfect communion and to engage in common mission - and they had done so inspired by our work on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

The service of celebration was built around several inter-related themes. It began by affirming our common baptism in Christ, through whom we are called to be the Church. From Pentecostal to Orthodox, we are bound to each other in our baptism in Christ. Readings and prayers highlighted this interconnectedness. On the basis of baptism, the story of the Cathedral of Lausanne was told - the very stones of the Cathedral bearing testimony to a diversity in the life and witness of the worshipping community through the centuries. There had been the period of Roman Catholic life and witness, that of the Reformed Church and now a variety of other influences - Orthodox and Evangelical, all of which have shaped the

¹⁰ T.F. Best and Martin Robra (ed), *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, Geneva, WCC, 1997.

¹¹ See e.g. *Eighth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues*, Faith and Order Paper No. 190, Geneva, WCC 2002.

¹² The Report and Papers of the Driebergen consultation will be published in 2004.

¹³ The speeches of the Colloquium are posted on the Faith and Order website.

identity of the community in that place. As with other local churches throughout the world, diversity of confessional tradition is woven into the fabrics of our identity. Finally the very stones cried out. Young people of Lausanne asked the churches to move urgently to the celebration together of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Our unity as people of God was affirmed through our calling to be living stones in the building whose cornerstone is Christ. The implications of this unity for our mission were articulated in sermon, readings, prayers and the hymns of praise of the people of God.

In the course of the service, Faith and Order was presented with one of the stones of the Cathedral. All the biblical images of stone were focused in this symbol. The stone is also a symbol of the relation between the local church and the fellowship of churches throughout the world. The Cathedral in Lausanne replaces each stone of the Cathedral once each century, because the sandstone weathers and becomes fragile. The stone presented to us enveloped the delegates of the First World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne 1927 and stands in the Ecumenical Centre Chapel - as an invitation to work in the awareness that Christ - the cornerstone - welds us into one.

If the event in Lausanne in August 2002 was a particular highlight for Faith and Order in the past decade, it was also an expression of the major themes with which the Commission has wrestled during this period.

Community - with and for others

During the two weeks prior to my writing this report - at the beginning of May - I was invited to share with my colleagues on the WCC Staff Executive Group and then with the Staff Leadership Group some reflections on the work of Faith and Order in the past decade. Obviously both then and now are too close to the events and issues to undertake a realistic evaluation, and I am probably not the person best placed to do such an evaluation since I have been too close to the work of Faith and Order perhaps to offer an objective assessment.

In preparing for these presentations, however, I did try to see where the threads were that connected the specific studies and activities of our work. I sought to identify what themes kept recurring. Were there any such themes? Has this been a decade of such rapid change that it has not been possible to maintain coherence? As I began to explore reports to the Standing Commission, accounts of our work in the annual Information Letter and the various studies themselves as they have been developing, there emerged a number of themes.

First of all there has been an awareness that the ecumenical movement and Faith and Order are in the middle of a pilgrimage of Christians from all confessional traditions to manifest visible unity. The churches have committed themselves to a journey, whose end is only vaguely perceived. This theme has been evident in the reports on Ecclesiology and Ethics, but it was developed further as the rationale and spirituality which was to provide a framework for the Common Understanding and Vision process, and for the Padua at the Harare Assembly. The concept of pilgrimage has been fundamental also for the work on Baptism - the continuing journey of faithfulness to the Gospel, and provided the ambience for the work undertaken in a series of consultations at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey on issues of human sexuality. The theme of pilgrimage was central to the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the First World Conference on Faith and Order in the Cathedral in Lausanne in 2002. Pilgrimage involves an awareness of being engaged in a common enterprise of respectful listening, of challenge, of the exchange of gifts and of the fact that pilgrims are themselves changed by the experience and the encounters. The "other" becomes a gift not a threat.

The awareness of being on a common journey is rooted in the awareness that in baptism we are baptised into a local or particular community and engrafted into the Body of Christ which transcends the boundaries of specific churches. Thus Baptism has been not only the topic for two interlinked studies in Faith and Order and in the Joint Working Group between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, it has also been the subject of reflections in the revision of "The Nature and Purpose of the Church". Baptism was also a central topic of conversation in the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, and reflection there has led to the question being raised again of whether there should be a reference to Baptism in Article I

of the WCC Constitution. It has also provided a challenge in reflection on Ethnic Identity and National Identity, to those communities who claim an exclusive identification with the People of God or the Covenant Community. In the various Seminars on human sexuality, it also proved to be important to start with the common affirmation of baptism or the exegesis of baptismal texts before looking at issues or texts on human sexuality that have led to exclusion and tension.

Thirdly, a recurrent theme - again closely interlinked with pilgrimage and baptism has been that of the Church - local and universal, one and diverse. The Statement on this theme drafted for the Ninth Assembly of the WCC at Porto Alegre is but the latest reflection on this. As I have indicated earlier, this theme was a central feature of the celebration in the Cathedral of Lausanne in 2002. It was also an issue raised in the context of the Special Commission where the question was posed to the Orthodox Churches who define themselves as One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church. Is it possible for you to account for the churches beyond your own boundaries? And to the other churches who speak of themselves as "part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church", how do you relate to the universal Church? While I have argued that this is a too facile comparison, it has enabled us sharply to examine the ecclesiological tensions - one and diverse, local and universal. Throughout the decade this has been a recurring theme. In the consideration on ethnic identity, and the discussion on hermeneutics in "A Treasure in Earthen Vessels"¹⁴, it has provided a central issue for reflection. These tensions were also identified and, to some extent, addressed by Mary Tanner and Konrad Raiser amongst others at the last meeting of the Plenary Commission in Moshi (1996)¹⁵. If we are to move forward to manifest that real but incomplete communion which we currently enjoy on the basis of baptism in Christ on our pilgrimage towards unity, then the Church universal needs to be a fellowship of churches united in each place, exhibiting appropriate diversity.

All of these concerns relate to the final theme I wish to identify, which has been important for our work viz. that of Christian hospitality. How do we receive the other in their otherness? How do we reflect the communion of the Holy Trinity in our living and being? Clearly this concept, implicitly and explicitly, lies as a basis for our reflections on anthropology - how do we receive the other as a person in the image of God?; for our study on ethnic identity - how do we receive the other as a person when our community has identified them as "the enemy"? The understanding of hospitality has also emerged as critical in the reflection on religious plurality - how do we receive the other from a different religious tradition who may address the Word of God to us? In many other areas the theme appears as a subtext of our work. It also is evident that hospitality is seen to be made possible if and only if Christians and their churches are to embrace the way of kenosis - having the same mind which is in Christ (Phil 2:5-10), theme which was the subject of my own address to the last Plenary Commission meeting. The Scottish poet Edwin Muir phrased this so well in his poem "The Annunciation":

Now in this iron reign
I sing the liberty
Where each asks from each
What each most wants to give
And each awakes in each
What else would never be,
Summoning so the rare
Spirit to breathe and live.

....
This is the most
That soul and body can,
To make us each for each
And in our spirit whole.¹⁶

Pilgrimage - baptism - church: local and universal, one and diverse - hospitality - kenosis - a series of interlocking and interdependent ideas. As I began to discern that those themes appeared in a wide range of issues and theological explorations undertaken by the

¹⁴ Faith and Order Paper No. 182, Geneva, WCC 1998.

¹⁵ Alan Falconer (ed), Faith and Order in Moshi. Faith and Order Paper No. 177, Geneva, WCC 1998.

¹⁶ Edwin Muir, Collected Poems, London, Faber and Faber 1960, p. 117.

Commission over the past decade, I found myself returning to the report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela (1993). The Section I Report as it elaborates the biblical and theological basis of koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness focused on precisely these themes. Let me cite two paragraphs from the Report:

"§ 20: The dynamic process of koinonia involves the recognition of the complementarity of human beings. As individuals and as communities, we are confronted by the others in their otherness, e.g. theologically, ethnically, culturally. Koinonia requires respect for the other and a willingness to listen to the other and to seek to understand them. In this process of dialogue, where each is changed in the encounter, there takes place the appropriation of the stories of action, reaction and separation whereby each has defined himself or herself in opposition to the other. The search for establishing koinonia involves appropriating the pain and hurt of the other and through a process of individual and collective repentance, forgiveness and renewal, taking responsibility for that suffering.

Confrontation with the other, individually and collectively, is always a painful process, challenging as it does our own lifestyle, convictions, piety and way of thinking. The encounter with the other in the search to establish the koinonia, grounded in God's gift, calls for a kenosis - a self-giving and a self-emptying. Such a kenosis arouses fear of loss of identity, and invites us to be vulnerable, yet such is no more than faithfulness to the ministry of vulnerability and death of Jesus as he sought to draw human beings into communion with God and each other. He is the pattern and patron of reconciliation which leads to koinonia. As individuals and communities, we are called to establish koinonia through a ministry of kenosis.

...

§ 27 Spiritual ecumenism should undergird all endeavours to foster koinonia. There is a need for a continuing emphasis in Faith and Order work that prayer and theology go hand in hand, and that Christian spirituality - growth towards holiness in heart and mind - is a means of preparing people to receive the koinonia which God wants to give to the Church. The importance of the place of prayer, penitence and humility should not be underestimated. As churches come together to manifest the unity which is sincerely sought, attitudes to God and to each other must be changed. This is the call to metanoia and kenosis. Many have spoken on the significance of locating this conference at Santiago de Compostela, the place for penitent pilgrims. As we strip ourselves of false securities, finding in God our true and only identity, daring to be open and vulnerable to each other, we will be living as pilgrims on a journey, discovering the God of surprises who leads us into roads which we have not travelled, and we will find in each other true companions on the way."¹⁷

It seems to me that our last World Conference offered us perspectives which have in fact provided a framework for our work in this decade.

As I demit my office as Director of Faith and Order, I would like to thank my colleagues for all their dedicated work, and for the inspiration and support they have given me in this demanding job. I would also like to thank the Officers of Faith and Order throughout this period for their wise counsel and advice, and members of the Commission for the hard work, inspiration and collaboration in the various studies we have undertaken in this period.

May God richly bless the continuing work of the Commission.

Footnotes

¹ This development is evident in the Porvoo, Reuilly, Waterloo, Called to Common Mission agreements amongst others in this period.

² Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (PCSA and RPCSA), 1999; Church of Jesus Christ in Lairem (Baptists & Church of Jesus Christ, North-East India), 1999; United Reformed Church (Congregational Union of Scotland and URC in the UK), 2000; Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC, 9 denominations, from the Consultation on Church Union) (USA), 2002; Union of Evangelical Churches in the Evangelical Church in Germany (UEK in the EKD) (Formed from the EKV and The Arnoldshainer Konferenz (Akf), Germany), 2003; Communion of Churches in India (CSI, CNI, Mar Thoma, 2004; Protestant Church in the Netherlands (NRC, RCN, ELC), 2004.

¹⁷ T.F. Best and G. Gassmann (ed), On the Way to Fuller Koinonia. Faith and Order Paper No. 166, Geneva, WCC 1994, §§ 20 & 27, pp. 232-234.

³ E.g. the All Africa Conference of Churches.

⁴ See J. Gros et al (ed), *Growth in Agreement Vol II Faith and Order Paper No. 187*, Geneva, WCC 2000 and the chart of bilateral dialogues completed or in progress since 1998 on the Faith and Order website.

⁵ See the Minutes of the WCC Central Committee for references to the discussion on the establishment of the Forum.

⁶ See *The Ecumenical Review* 49 (I) 1997.

⁷ Pierre Duprey, "The encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* and Faith and Order", in Colin Podmore (ed), *Community - Unity - Communion. Essays in honour of Mary Tanner*, London, Church House Publishing 1998.

⁸ H.E. Cardinal Kasper - address to the Plenum of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 2003.

⁹ See *The Ecumenical Review* 55 (I) 2003

¹⁰ T.F. Best and Martin Robra (ed), *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, Geneva, WCC, 1997.

¹¹ See e.g. Eighth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues, Faith and Order Paper No. 190, Geneva, WCC 2002.

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¹⁴ Faith and Order Paper No. 182, Geneva, WCC 1998.

¹⁵ Alan Falconer (ed), *Faith and Order in Moshi*. Faith and Order Paper No. 177, Geneva, WCC 1998.

¹⁶ Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems*, London, Faber and Faber 1960, p. 117.