

World Council of Churches
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

*Faith and Order Plenary Commission
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Message from the Younger Theologians

It is with deep gratitude and pleasure that we find ourselves within a community of church leaders and theologians searching for possible expressions of and ways to unity within the Body of Christ. And so we offer our sincere thanks to you for receiving us in this meeting of the Faith and Order Commission in Kuala Lumpur. Due to our limited experience, we confess that at times we have remained puzzled about the subtle complexities of the work of Faith and Order. However, we are delighted and encouraged by the opportunity to join you in the hard work of ecumenical dialogue. While the reality of visible unity may continue to elude us, we refuse the temptation to be discouraged and remain committed to the journey towards Christian unity however long and unpredictable it may be.

And while we address you as a group of younger theologians, we worry about the implications of capturing our voice in this way. We represent a diverse group drawn from different Christian traditions and as such we embody the many differences of the Faith and Order Commission itself. So we are hesitant to give the impression that we speak in a unified voice because we do not want to trivialize the unity we claim. We are concerned about a perceived tendency to assume we have a complete grasp of the nature of the unity we seek, and would welcome further exploration into the notion of unity we so often invoke.

At the same time, we seek to distance ourselves from the label "younger theologians" because we are concerned about a certain "hermeneutics of contextualization" that we have experienced over the last few days. We wonder if the word "context" is used too frequently and casually, such that the message it is supposed to bear loses much of its meaning. When we speak, for example, "as Orthodox" or "as Latin Americans," or even "as younger theologians," it gives the impression that we are the owner of our context or are perhaps owned by it. This is to participate in a logic of ownership which frustrates our emphasis on receptivity. In this regard, we have sensed that the discussion tends to take an apologetic tone, and would be encouraged by a more constructive way of doing theology.

For theology to be meaningful, it cannot neglect the perspective of local communities or the so-called grassroots. We affirm the recent efforts of the Faith and Order Commission to be more inclusive in this regard dealing with matters that were once seen as peripheral to theological reflection, such as peace, violence, and power; ethnicity and national identity; issues of gender and sexuality; and disabilities; etc. We are pleased to see the ETHNAT and Theological Anthropology studies located next to the classic theological studies on Baptism and Ecclesiology. And yet we sense that there remains the tension between theory and practice that haunts the work of Faith and Order and of the wider ecumenical movement. What we find missing is an interweaving of theological formulations and ethical implications in the documents. If this connection is more clearly visible, we believe that the theology will be more relevant and truly in dialogue with the life of the local communities. We are afraid that all these theological formulations go to waste if not integrated to the realities of our lives.

We believe that our theme "Receive one another, just as Christ has received you, for the glory of God" (Rom 15:7) persistently echoes the call for consistency between faith and life. However, we have noticed a tendency to limit our discussion to the idea of receiving one another, simply as expression of hospitality. We wonder if we have spent enough time reflecting on what it might mean for our very identity to exist as gift, as something received. At the same time we suspect that beginning with the glory of God and reading the verse backwards would be a helpful and much needed reminder that the task of receiving one another does not rest solely on our shoulders. Neither is the quest for unity a choice we are free to make; it is an imperative for all Christians.

We affirm that this is a difficult task, but to be tempted to feel comfortable in tensions among us would deny the dynamism of Christ's call for unity among Christians. Perhaps we could go beyond the question of who is the host and who is the guest as we take seriously the call of Jesus to love one another as He has loved us. (John 13:34)

It is our prayer that the commission will never tire of showing us glimpses of unity among us. Allowing us to be part of this noble tradition as younger theologians made us proud. We hope that this tradition continues, because this has opened venues for our growth in our own task of sharing in the ecumenical work. Thank you for receiving us and helping us accept one another for the glory of God!