



## World Council of Churches

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**“What unites us is greater than what divides us”**

### **Faith and Order Director’s Address**

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I remember hearing about “Faith and Order” for the first time. I was a freshman in theology reading Fr Georges Florovsky’s biography, and the phrase stuck in my mind. For someone so fascinated with the theological endeavour, someone who could not imagine a better career than becoming a theologian and anything more meaningful than being able to discuss, debate and settle theological disputes with other like- or differently-minded people, it sounded almost like a mythical setting. Just a few weeks later Metropolitan John Zizioulas’ 1995 article “Faith and Order yesterday, today and tomorrow” ended up in my hands. What a strange coincidence, I thought. As I was discovering even more the rich and fascinating world of 20th-century theology and moving from my undergraduate to PhD studies, I started doing my research on Thomas F. Torrance, himself a Faith and Order member for years. It seemed to me that there is a common thread connecting all these beautiful theological minds. Their exposure to and interaction with one another and with a wider ecumenical environment seems to have opened up their minds to understand God’s revelation in ever more creative and fruitful ways.

I had the opportunity to become exposed to this transforming experience of engaging with the ecumenical world. Coming to the 10<sup>th</sup> WCC Assembly as a delegate of my own Serbian Orthodox Church, after which I became a Central Committee member. I would assume that my special abilities that were highly valued at the time included being a lay Orthodox youth. This experience deeply affected my life over time. That I was transformed might sound like an overstatement, but the conversations, interactions, and praying together with Christians from various geographical, confessional, and denominational backgrounds opened up many horizons. As a Central Committee member, I paid close attention to the work of the Faith and Order Commission, imagining it to be the “country of origin” of some of my favourite theologians and as that part of the WCC’s work where in-depth theological conversations take place.

Just a couple of months ago, I was humbled and moved to be given the unique privilege to join the Faith and Order (hi)story. I stand in front of you today feeling that same awe and humility I felt when I learned the news of my appointment. However, the overwhelming feeling of humility in view of the great legacy, importance, and global recognition the Commission has made way for a feeling of excitement. It is an exciting experience to join Faith and Order at this very moment of its history and to be able to take part in shaping its future. There are many reasons for that excitement and I would like to highlight some of them in the following lines.

## Looking at the Achievements

This present Commission is unique in the history of Faith and Order. Becoming restructured and beginning its work in 2015, the Commission developed a new working methodology and started operating in a way that made room for more productive and closer engagement of all its members. In the last two months, since I took up the position of the Commission's director, I have often heard Faith and Order praised for being a "working commission" and, thereby a role model for other WCC commissions. Thanks to the persistent commitment of you, the Commissioners, and the Secretariat, this has led to many fruitful outcomes. I will not go through all of them but only mention some aspects of the Commission's work that I find remarkable.

Three documents produced by Study Group One, *Come and See*, *Love and Witness* and *Cultivate and Care*, have demonstrated how fruitful employing new methodologies in the Commission's work can be. Not only did it provide firm theological grounding for the understanding of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, a paradigm that guided the work of the Council since the Busan Assembly, but it has also demonstrated two important things. Firstly, ecumenical theology is not only about churches self-reflecting on their commonalities and divisions but also about having a common theological voice on important issues. In this way, the pilgrimage metaphor was reflected upon and enacted through the actual theological journey undertaken together, even before working out all the differences. Secondly, these documents have demonstrated that social justice issues are not less theological in their nature and play an important role in churches' journey towards visible unity, and as such, require the attention of Faith and Order.

Extensive work on the ecclesiological matters conducted by Study Group Two bore many fruits. Taking up the work on the reception of the *TCTCV* document and analysing the responses to it provided deep insights into the understanding of the church, which proved to be greatly shared by different church traditions. What I found to be rather fascinating is the insight that what unites us "is greater in depth, breadth, and importance" than what divides us keeps being mentioned repeatedly in various responses and reports. Indeed, it sounds like a slogan worth having as a constant reminder and a guiding motto of our work. What unites us is greater than what divides us.

Through indirect and direct encounters and explorative research, Study Group Two has also chattered new ground through the pioneering work of *broadening the table of discussion* that became widely accepted with appreciation in the work of the WCC. Engaging with denominations, regions, and new forms of church that historically have not been involved in the Faith and Order work on the dialogue on matters of ecclesiology has proven to not only be desirable but it is also a necessary step in making the Faith and Order work relevant in today's world. This approach has received much acclaim within the Commission and wider ecumenical space. The insight that the points of convergence are much greater than previously thought came through as a well come surprise and conclusion of this Subgroup's work, as well. However difficult and sometimes challenging, "unearthing" these points of convergence is a worthwhile endeavour since it again reveals to us: what unites us is greater than what divides us.

Anyone who is present in the ecumenical space (or on social media, for that matter) is quite aware to what extent ethical issues have become divisive, causing polarization within societies and breaking up churches and church families. Many of these dividing conversations have affected

relationships within the WCC fellowship, as well. It often seems that we are much more comfortable with our differences in understanding God's self-revelation than we are when it comes to the diverse understanding of God's vision of life for human beings. Therefore, it seems more remarkable that this Commission, through the work of Study Group Three, has creatively engaged with different traditions, learned from specific historical examples, and developed a study document together that articulates continuity and change in moral discernment. I firmly believe that *Churches and Moral Discernment. Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia* justifies its purpose well, as it already has and will continue to enable meaningful dialogues taking place within the churches, in the bilateral dialogues and also the WCC reference groups, in order to strengthen and not threaten the fellowship. This study document also seems to bear the very same testimony: what unites us is greater than what divides us. Moreover, it points to the fact that based on that what unites us, we can develop a new approach to many differences that still exist.

The unity we share is perhaps most evident and felt the strongest while we pray for it together. That is why preparing for and promoting the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which we do together with the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, is so important. The material prepared through this collaborative effort, being so widespread and used across the globe, is a true testimony to how impactful and well received our work can be.

It seems that all of the aforementioned accomplishments of the Commission's work point to three fundamental things. First, employing new ways of doing ecumenical theology and innovative working methodological approaches has proven very fruitful. Secondly, engaging with the 'new' demographics, denominations, and forms of being church is not only desirable but necessary for the Commission to fulfil its purpose. Thirdly, the insight that what unites us is far greater than what divides us seems to be a converging point of the work of all the study groups. It makes one wonder whether instead of imagining the visible unity as a "holy grail" we need to go on a quest for in the country of our separate existence, we should understand it as the precious treasure that is already present within us, in need of being unearthed. One cannot but hope that this (re)discovery would affect the churches' growth in fellowship and bring them closer together.

As this Commission ends its fruitful mandate, the question is: where do we go from here?

### **Envisioning the Future**

I firmly believe that this Commission's work has created a great momentum for the future of Faith and Order, in addition to several other contributing factors.

Firstly, the Assembly has set the *Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity* as a new guiding paradigm for our work in the coming years. The focus on unity brings an opportunity for Faith and Order to explore further the different models of unity, the meaning of visible unity that we strive for, the relationship of unity to mission and other Assembly-mandated issues. Perhaps most importantly, this enables the Commission to work closely and relate its work to the wider WCC programme areas whilst fulfilling its core purpose of assisting the churches as they call one another to visible unity.

Secondly, the call to broaden the discussion table has taken the Commission on a new path that treats the ecclesiological matters with more attention to the Global South and to the churches that are not part of the WCC. The Nominations Committee has implemented this guiding vision and proposed a list of nominees for the next Commission that includes more names from the Global South, more youth, and more representatives of Pentecostal churches. This will, pending the final decision from this Commission meeting and the Central Committee, make the next

Commission more inclusive of all regions, church traditions, and younger generations, thereby keeping the Commission more in touch with present-day Christianity in the coming years.

Thirdly, as we face the separation and division within and among churches on ethical issues, the work on moral discernment becomes ever more relevant. I believe that Faith and Order should take pride in its work in this area and further develop it, enhancing the reception and use of the tool for facilitating dialogue on ethical issues.

Fourthly, the Nicaea2025 celebration creates a unique opportunity for Faith and Order, unmatched in its recent history. The series of events having at its center the World Conference will bring us into the spotlight of the ecumenical world. Moreover, engaging with, and integrating wider WCC programmes in this Faith-and-Order-led celebration and in cooperation with churches and ecumenical partners will enable us to take the lead in bringing visibility to our work. On the other hand, Nicaea2025 creates a unique opportunity for us not only to speak about, but also to listen to the churches and needs of today's world. The Planning group has worked hard and developed a profound vision that will guide us in preparing for this celebration. To a great extent, 2025 will be a milestone in Faith and Order's history.

How are we to make use of this momentum? There are a few things that come to my mind.

We should be bold. As we try to unearth the unity we share, we should also be prepared to face our differences. The Commission's forum should be a "safe space" for conducting a fruitful theological dialogue and sharing different perspectives. Still, it should also be a "brave space" in which we enter, ready to challenge and be challenged, urging each other to rethink our positions as we move together in the spirit of trust, mutual respect, and accountability. Should we not dare each other to go even further in the attempt to address our differences and discern a common mind?

We should be even more creative. While many of you praised the new methodological approaches to classical ecumenical themes, while reading your responses to the survey, I noticed that many of you encouraged the Commission to go even further and be more serious about developing new methodological approaches. Having a World Conference (as a hybrid event) pushes our imagination to think of what we could do differently and even more effectively to achieve a greater impact. Could we reimagine the work of the Commission that would develop outcomes in different forms and go beyond document production? Can we be more attentive to the forms of theological production that would make impact on the life of the churches and their growth in unity even more?

We should go further with engaging with new forms of communication in order to increase visibility and reception. The use of webinars has enabled us to reach more people. The Faith and Order Digital Library has made the documents easily accessible to a wider audience. However, I wonder could we not even do more to make the work on visible unity even more visible? What kind of communication strategies do we need to implement in order to increase visibility of the rich legacy of Faith and Order's work, as a giant on whose shoulders we should stand if we want to see far? How do we make this legacy even more approachable for the faithful to use?

## **Conclusion**

It is indeed a privilege to be a part of Faith and Order in these challenging yet exciting times. However, I know that any work done with and for the Commission can only be done if it is done

together. Therefore, I am very grateful to the many people I have been working with in the last two months. First of all, I am most grateful to the Commission Moderator, Rev. Dr Susan Durber, for her gracious and supportive collaboration. She makes work an easy and joyful enterprise. I very much relied on the knowledge and experience of my colleagues from the Faith and Order Secretariat. Working with Dr Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, Rev. Dr Simone Sinn, Dr Vasile-Octavian Mihoc, and Rev. Dr Mikie Roberts before I arrived in Geneva in February and ever since, has been a true blessing. I am firmly convinced that in the coming years, as a team, we will be able to do much more and I look forward to it. The support Ms Jacqueline O'Neill provides to our work is nothing short of invaluable. Having such a well-organized leader with a clear vision of the direction ahead, as Rev. Dr Kuzipa Nalwamba has helped my transition to the new position run as smoothly as possible. In the last weeks, all of us at the WCC Secretariat have been challenged and moved to work in a more synergetic way by Rev. Dr Jerry Pillay. I very much look forward to seeing the fresh framework that he brings to the WCC's work being further developed in the coming years. My predecessor Rev. Dr Odair Pedroso Mateus has been generous in sharing his wisdom and rich experience, which I was happy to rely on. To all of them, and many others, I remain truly grateful, hoping that God will reward their good deeds with many blessings.

Most of all, I wish to thank you, the Faith and Order Commissioners. As many of you will part ways with the Commission while others will continue to serve, I wish to thank you for creating the momentum that makes anyone's engagement with the work of Faith and Order exciting and inspiring. I pray that God gives us all strength and continues to move us as we continue to journey together and recognize in each other: what unites us is far greater than what divides us.

May we all "strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace", so that the God of love and peace may be with us (2 Corinthians 13:11).

**Yours in Resurrected Christ,**

**Dr Andrej Jeftic**

**Faith and Order director**