

Faith and Order Commission 2023 – Moderator's Report

I am writing this report just after the celebration of Easter in the West, and I have both a sense of rejoicing that Christ is risen, defeating death and treading down evil, but also a pang of sorrow that we are not yet united in celebrating Easter together. I come from a Reformed tradition that urges that 'every Sunday is a little Easter', but I have also learned so much from those from other Christian traditions than my own about the significance of the annual celebration of Christ's triumph over death. I remember the stewards at our first Commission meeting in Romania asking me what were my favourite Easter hymns and how we sang to each other of the resurrection while sharing a glass of something together late at night. This year our Commission meeting will take place in the season of Easter and I hope that it will have as its foundation the joy in which we *all* share as we celebrate the risen Christ. Whatever our differences, however deep the struggles between us and however intractable some of our divisions may seem to be, we are united in a common and indestructible faith. I believe that our time in working together as a Commission has been one in which we have all enriched one another in faith and been able to do the work to which we were nominated by our churches and elected by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches; to serve the churches as they call one another to that unity for which Christ prayed, and still prays.

Of course, no-one ever expected this work to be easy and we have been stretched and challenged as we have done it. We have not always done it perfectly or with the best grace. We have been challenged by Covid-19, by the difficulties of our own separate lives in our varied contexts and by the realities of the world in which we live. I hope that, as we look back, we can forgive each other for our failings, and generously celebrate what we have achieved together.

Since we met as a Commission in March last year, a great deal has happened. We have continued to work on completing and enabling the reception of our work in the three original study groups, through webinars and other events. Some of us have also been attending regular meetings to prepare to mark, and celebrate, the anniversary of Nicaea in 2025. Several of us took part in an international conference on receptive ecumenism in June 2022 in Sigtuna, Sweden. The Assembly of the WCC took place in Karlsruhe at the end of August and many of us were there, engaged in many different ways; drafting the Unity Statement, leading Ecumenical Conversations, facilitating a Workshop, organising and planning the worship and much more. With colleagues within the wider WCC and according to an agreed Memorandum of Understanding, we also this year appointed a new Director, Dr Andrej Jeftic, and he has moved to Geneva and begun his work with great promise. We held a Joint Study Group meeting in November at Bossey at which we shared much conversation and said a warm 'thank you' to our previous Director, Rev Dr Odair Pedroso Mateus. The Nominations Committee of the Commission has met in person (in February of this year) and again on-line to prepare for this meeting and for the Central Committee meeting in June that will elect a new Commission. I know that many of us have been engaged in writing about Faith and Order's work too, in communicating it as best we can to the churches and in making sure that Faith and Order is well represented at the heart of the WCC. The Secretariat, who work more widely than for the Commission alone, have worked hard on church relations, on the Assembly, on visits with the new General Secretary, in

teaching at Bossey and elsewhere, in connecting our work with other global and church gatherings, on preparing worship for many events and looking ahead to the Week of Prayer, and much more besides.

There are some who might perhaps express frustration and disappointment that our presence was not more strongly evident at the Assembly. And I do think there are lessons to be learned about how the WCC presents the work it does *between* assemblies to those gathered at such a large celebration for so many days. When delegates at the assembly call for more theological work on climate change, for example (as they did in Karlsruhe), it is important that they can know that such work has already been done – work of which Faith and Order can be justly proud. I was glad that we had a strong part in the Unity Statement and that we were able to refer there to the responses of the churches to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. I rejoice that appreciation for our work was expressed in the plenary on unity. And it is good that the whole assembly was bidden to look forward to Nicaea2025. But it would have been good if we could have *presented* some of our work to those gathered in ways other than in a space competing for attention with live music. And it would have been excellent if the Assembly could have been made more aware of our work on moral discernment, on doing ecumenical theology in new ways, and of the directions of travel on ecclesiology. I know that we are not alone in Faith and Order in feeling sometimes marginalised (and that it's unwise to get stuck in that place), and I do understand that an Assembly is about listening to the churches, but I had the sense that the delegates wanted not more 'set pieces', but more engagement and conversation. I think the future of such gatherings may be different. At the same time, I am struck that we have needed in Faith and Order to give more attention ourselves to the reception of our work – it is never enough to publish texts without promoting them, without making them available in other ways (podcasts etc), without publishing also in mainstream journals and being present at all kinds of gatherings. This is certainly a lesson for the future.

More personally, we have also, since we last met as a Commission, known the loss of His Eminence Metropolitan Gennadios, a tireless and tenacious advocate for Faith and Order within the ecumenical movement. He will long be remembered and celebrated – his influence was profound and his commitment to ecumenism unsurpassed. Many others among us have suffered losses or ill health, moved posts or into retirement, begun new work or a new phase of life's journey. There have been marriages to celebrate and life to affirm. For all of us the war in Ukraine has been a deep sorrow, and for some it has been a personal tragedy. As the friendships among us have deepened so we have come to know one another's griefs, struggles and joys – and we have supported one another in whatever ways became possible. If ecumenism builds from the 'heart', from the love that we have learned in Jesus Christ, then we have known that among us. A Commission meets for a long time, but that time brings the gift of forming close relationships, from which springs our common work. When we first met in Romania, we may have spoken of building unity between us in a rather abstract way, but now that unity is truly felt. And we miss those who, for all kinds of reasons, have not been able to engage so strongly with us in recent times. I hope and pray that the next Commission will be blessed with such firm friendship.

At this coming Commission meeting we shall have to find some words with which to say 'thank you' and 'farewell' to each other. Some will be staying to be part of a new

Commission, but many will move on. Some have served on the Commission in various ways over decades and their words are threaded through some of our most precious texts. Some have come as 'younger theologians' and have each flourished and grown before our eyes. All have contributed to the work we do and all should be honoured. We owe a particular debt to the co-convenors of the Study Groups, who have driven the work forward and made sure that the harvest of this Commission has been rich. We also owe many thanks to our secretariat; to Ani, Jacqueline, Octavian, Mikie, Simone, and to Odair and now Andrej, for their dedicated and imaginative work. It is not easy to manage this delicate relationship between staff and Commissioners, staff and volunteers, but with them we have build a community together and while we have kept, I hope, appropriate boundaries, we have made this truly a shared venture.

At this coming meeting, we shall first greet each other! We will also hear at our first meeting from our new Director, Dr Andrej Jeftic, from Rev. Dr Kuzipa Nalwamba, the programme director for Unity and Mission at the WCC, and also from the new General Secretary of the WCC, Rev Professor Jerry Pillay. We welcome these new companions on our pilgrimage of unity. As the meeting progresses, we will be looking back and then looking forward. In looking back we shall receive minutes of the last Commission and also hear reports from the study groups. We will seek to learn from the on-line evaluation in which many of you have engaged, so that the next Commission, and the WCC as a whole, might learn from our considered experience. We shall look forward by consolidating what we would hope to pass on to the next Commission in terms of the direction of the work. We shall focus on a piece of work to be accomplished as this Commission transitions into a new one: the celebration of Nicaea2025 and the preparations for that – as we hope to provide an opportunity for the churches to reflect today, in the light of Nicaea, on Faith, Unity and Mission. We shall receive the report of our own Nominations Committee with recommendations for a slate of names for the next Commission (to be sent to the Central Committee) and a proposal for the person who might be the next Moderator of the Commission. The meeting will focus on necessary business, but will also include some exciting presentations from commissioners that, I am sure, will light up the meeting with a sense of our core purpose as a gathering of theologians who are serving the ecumenical movement. In our final session we will hear greetings and reflection from Rev Dr Peter Cruchley, the new Director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, and from the nominated Moderator of that Commission, Rev Dr Michael Blair.

I was recently invited to speak via Zoom to a group of students doing a course on ecumenism in Boston, USA. They sent me the reading list and I was delighted to see several of our names there and also several of our documents that go un-named, but are our work. You may not all recognise how wide our influence can be or how far and to whom our work reaches. We are part of a longer story than this Commission alone, and it is our privilege.

I pray that our meeting will be filled with the joy appropriate to this Easter season, with that peace which the risen Christ breathed upon his disciples and the love that the Holy Spirit has deepened among us over these years. I am so sorry that we cannot meet in person, for then we could more fully express our joy in each other's company and our thankfulness for the work we have done.

For many of you this may be a first introduction to our new Director, with whom I have been glad to be working closely now for some months. Please pray for him, for the secretariat and for all the commissioners and consultants – as we prepare to meet for this last time together. Peace be with you.

Rev Dr Susan Durber - Moderator