

WCC Global Platform on theological reflection and analysis

Major learnings from the 2007 process

Purpose

The WCC Global Platform is an experimental project in creating space for theological reflection and analysis in the ecumenical movement. As such it will be evaluated at the end of three years to see if this is a useful and valuable exercise. It is not intended to duplicate the work of Faith and Order nor to substitute for the theological reflection that should be an integral aspect of all WCC's activities.

The Global Platform works by choosing a theme each year which is of significance for the ecumenical movement and setting up appropriate processes. The theme is chosen by a representative Core Group and may or may not relate to the programmes and projects of the WCC. Where it does relate, as in the case of migration in 2007, the Global Platform will interact with associated staff, networks etc. However, the main process of the Global Platform is to:

- access and make available the theological reflection around the chosen issue that is already being undertaken in churches, specialised ministries, ecumenical bodies, networks etc;
- stimulate theological reflection on the issue where it is not happening;
- to learn from one another and together how to do theological reflection around issues.

The Global Platform is as much interested in the processes of theological reflection and analysis as the products. The Global Platform will attempt, in each instance, to offer a creative space which can be used with integrity. The Global Platform is not intended to be a permanent forum for the issues chosen but a space that is used in different ways each year.

The 2007 process – theological reflection on migration

In spite of the delayed start to the project, the 2007 theme of the Global Platform, theological reflection on migration, attracted a good response from the ecumenical movement. Around 200 churches, specialised ministries, networks and involved individuals responded to the initial invitation to participate and about 50 examples of theological reflection were submitted (reports, papers, Bible studies and worship resources). Many of these were posted on the WCC website.

The Global Platform meeting, 26-29 November 2007, had 27 participants plus five programme staff from the Ecumenical Centre and the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey. Invitees were selected from respondents to the initial invitation to participate in the process and WCC related migration networks. The meeting began with three case studies (Southern Africa, African migrant churches in Europe and the Middle East) and then considered the submissions received. Based on the ensuing reflections, the meeting divided itself into three groups under the themes – Migration, God and Place; Migration, God and humanity; Migration, God and the church. The meeting concluded with synthesis and analysis.

The theological questions raised by the 2007 Global Platform

A theological reflection on migration challenges our understanding of land. Is land a gift or a right, to be held as a common or exclusive possession? If land is a symbol of God's creativity and generosity, of God's will and ability to sustain abundant life for all, the accent is on interdependence and a deliberate inclusiveness in God's creation.

Land is often seen as the basis of economic and personal security and boundaries are secured against perceived or real threats. Where human security is sought in wealth, possessions, status, power or other human institutions and, therefore, when the desire for security is demonstrated in the refusal to share with others (often resulting in migration, unjust immigration laws and the oppressive treatment of migrants) it is challenged by Christian faith. Is the Christian community able to bring a powerful counter-cultural challenge to the false security of wealth/land because it is a community that transcends place? Have churches compromised their ability to speak truth to power by their support of structures of power and dominance, eg in their allegiance to nation states? What kind of theology controls or challenges our behaviour?

Land is also a symbol of culture and identity, including language, social structures and norms. Migrants and more settled populations alike need to remember their own cultural identity and respect that of others. However, cultures often become falsely closed, viewed as possessions to be defended against alien influences, impervious to the challenges of faith, persisting in unjust social norms that represent the false security that leads people away from God. Should culture, as with land, be understood as a common human inheritance, given by God to sustain and nurture all people as a reflection of all people's ultimate dependence upon God? God is always more generous, more inclusive and more mobile than we are.

A settled state of being is often taken as normative. Therefore, migrants are seen as problematical, whatever problems they are felt to create or actually suffer. A fixedness of mind, spirit and location may lead to a self-sufficiency that can separate us from God.

The claim that humans are made in the image of God raises questions about how we see the humanity of others and do not just presume that God's image is what we see in the mirror. A theological understanding of our common humanity should lead us to value one another even when others try to use differences to divide us. It should also lead to a sense of interdependency. Is there an interconnection between our relationship with God and our attitudes, relationships and behaviour towards other people, whereby the quality of the one is always determined by the quality of the other? A preoccupation in parts of the church with the individual may lead to a loss of our common identity as humans under God.

It can be argued that it is not enough to consider how existing churches can receive and welcome migrants as this is often understood as assimilating them into the status quo. Migration can be experienced as a challenge to the churches to change to become what the gospel call us to be. Migration challenges the church in the way it does and lives theology, in respect of:

- a. the body of Christ – how migrant and established Christians can complement one another in the body rather than worship in separated communities; how the presence of migrants enables us to understand brokenness and wholeness and is a sign of the embracing of all humanity;
- b. mission – migrants can bring a renewal of the missionary vocation of the local church, not only having a sense of mission towards migrants but in receiving what they bring;
- c. relating to people of other faiths and ideologies – enabling churches to encounter other faith communities and understand the nature of otherness both of people and of God;
- d. pilgrimage – migrants can help churches to see themselves as pilgrim communities, being on the move and ready to change, challenging self-understandings of churches which see themselves as unchanging institutions;
- e. baptism and identity – developing a concept of identity linked to baptism into Christ rather than location or culture; migrants allow churches to become aware of the risk of being closed entities with a static identity, instead of an identity marked by openness to otherness;
- f. Eucharist – we are all part of a vulnerable humanity in need of Christ's healing; it seems significant that the first Eucharist took place in a borrowed room; outside Christ there is nothing secure or stable on which we may rely.

The challenge of theological reflection on migration to the churches is not how to offer a Christian justification for a humanitarian response to those who suffer but how to become communities which do not support the conditions that create forced migration and which are open to that which God gives them through welcoming migrants.

Learnings on doing theological reflection through the Global Platform

Theological reflection is not well understood. This confirms the need identified in establishing the Global Platform. Part of its purpose is to learn from each other in the ecumenical movement how to do theological reflection around issues. Some of the resources shared in the process were pieces of social/political/economic analysis with the addition of Biblical texts. On the other hand, theological reflection goes beyond Bible study. Some participants in the meeting questioned whether they as 'non-theologians' could actually do theological reflection. If we want to promote an understanding and practice of theological reflection where faith, experience, context and action are in dialogue with one another and capable of affecting one another, then we must build into the whole process, not only the meeting, some initial introduction to theological reflection but without pre-determining the process or outcomes.

Developing the Global Platform process. Given that the 2007 theme was only chosen half way through the year, the collection of resources on theological reflection on migration from various actors in the ecumenical movement was effective. We have received appreciation for bringing these resources together and making them available on the web. However, there was no use of the discussion function on the website which we hoped would be a significant aspect of learning together. We will have to consider how we encourage and facilitate this interaction so that all interested people

can feel a sense of participation in the process and not just those who attend the meeting.

Encouraging a greater variety of resources. All the resources submitted were written texts. Some were designed to facilitate theological reflection on migration – learning resources, Bible studies and worship resources. We should encourage more video material – for example, documentary and interview – and music. Theological reflection needs an affective dimension as well as cognitive. We lacked direct access to theological reflection done by migrants. The resources received were all a product of or mediated through others. Time did not permit the platform to encourage people to do their own theological reflection on migration and feed it into the process but this should be an important aspect of the Global Platform

Developing wider partnerships. We should be more intentional in developing wider relationships to work on the process. Although there was good collaboration between potential stakeholders within the WCC (staff of the Global Platform, Migration and the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey), we should be pro-active in relating to known actors in the area of concern of the chosen theme.

Creative use of the meeting. As was demonstrated by the meeting in 2007, this can be a good in itself but that is not sufficient. We need to give more consideration and, therefore, greater clarity to the participants on the role of the meeting in the Global Platform process. We have tried to say that it is to be one aspect of the process and not the culmination of the process. The use of case studies was affirmed as a useful way of rooting theological reflection. However, those preparing case studies need to be accompanied so that the background can be known by participants in advance and more time given to doing theological reflection in the meeting. The aim of the case studies should not only be to hear about the theological reflection others have done but to enter into it. A responsive rather than a fixed process in the meeting was found to be helpful. This means appointing people who can discern the state of the discussion and propose actions and methodologies for taking it forward on a daily basis.

Feeding back into the ecumenical movement. This is an area which needs more exploration. Simply making available the collected resources and the outcome of the meeting is not sufficient.

Keeping a focus on theological reflection. This is one of the greatest challenges. Issues which involve human suffering demand a response and theological reflection can appear to be a distraction from an action. To many, also, the social/political/economic analysis of issues and situations comes more naturally than theological analysis – perhaps because it seems to offer a greater impetus to practical responses. It is not surprising, therefore, that it can be difficult for the Global Platform to keep the focus on theological reflection and analysis. This is particularly the case when the starting point of reflection is not theological concepts but people's realities. Keeping a focus on theological reflection is vital. This is not simply because of the nature of the Global Platform but because theological reflection is an agent of change.

The material collected and generated by the 2007 Global Platform process can be found on <http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=4244>