



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

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FOR INFORMATION

Mission: Unity and Diversity

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I thank you for the privilege of speaking in this plenary and of being part of this gathering. I speak on behalf of the Faith and Order Commission, partner with the other WCC Commissions, embracing fellow travellers on the pilgrimage of justice and peace.

The ecumenical movement has always begun with mission. Whether you think of the 1910 Edinburgh conference or whether you have in mind the recent Faith and Order publication *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, the search for unity begins with mission. And it begins not with *our* mission, but with God's mission, with God's great design for all creation.

But working out what that 'great design' truly is, has not always proved straightforward. There have been significant moments in all our journeys when we have recognised that we have often too easily confused our *own* designs with God's design. We have confused empire with mission. We have merged mission and development. We have pursued our own programmes and purposes and forgotten to listen to what God is already seeking to do among us, in Jesus Christ and through the gentle power of the Holy Spirit.

We have always needed one another to show us when we have deceived ourselves and forgotten that the mission is not ours, but God's, and that God's great design above all is revealed in Jesus Christ. We have come to see that, in order to understand the great design of God for the world, we need each other in all our diversity. We are none of us wise or discerning enough *on our own* to see the Christ who embodies the presence and the purposes of God. I need the Christ who lives in you, as you need the Christ who lives in me. Our unity is not needed so that we can feel good and at ease with one another, but so that we might see at last the truth that God is bringing.

The world today, and the church too, readily celebrates diversity. And diversity is well worth celebrating. It is good that God has made such a beautiful world full of difference and colour and distinctiveness. We have come to value the local, the particular, the distinctive identity, the different and the other. But the world, and to some extent the church today, has also begun to turn its face away from those things that might hold us, different though we are, together. There's a reaction now against internationalism, a suspicion of global agencies, even a questioning of words like 'unity', in case they signify the domination of one community or path over another. In such a world the church has a radically counter-cultural witness to bring, a witness to a God who makes *communion* between those who are different, who invites us into a truly 'catholic' church, through time and history and across the world, a Christ who prays 'that they may be one'. At the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC in 1968 we said that 'catholicity is the opposite of all forms of egoism and particularism.' In a time when separation and difference are sometimes turned to violence and terror, we witness to a God who calls those who are different from one another to find their true and profound unity, to find the things that hold them together. We can share in God's mission in many and different ways, but there will always be a need to say together, and in a clear *unison* voice, what we have discovered together about the fundamental nature of God and of God's mission. There are times to celebrate diversity, but always, for Christians, it is a diversity bounded by a unity of love.

We will never be able to share in God's great design fully unless we can do that together. From tackling climate change to bringing gender justice, from celebrating creation to proclaiming Christ, we cannot do these things fully and whole-heartedly and effectively unless we do them together, being clear with

ourselves and with the waiting world about what we can say ‘with one voice’ and with confidence and hope too.

I want to celebrate the way in which the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism has always been committed to empowering churches and mission bodies to be engaged in *common* mission, in Christ’s own way “towards life”. I know that we need now to find ways to do that that are right for these times; post-colonial, attending to the world as it is and not as it was, faithful and adventurous, alive to the present but also profoundly rooted in the traditions of our shared faith. And we will need to look at those things for which the world often has little patience today; turning to our common roots, believing that people who are different really can be in true unity, and bringing down walls. We, as churches, should celebrate our global reach, our lived unity, our common traditions, not being defensive about such things, but properly proud of what God has done and is doing among us.

I am delighted that the Faith and Order text *The Church: towards a Common Vision* has just been translated into Swahili, Mandarin, Bahasa Indonesian and Armenian. We speak many different languages. We come from many different cultures and many different churches. And yet, and yet, in all our diversity we are still being made one people, by the one God revealed in Jesus Christ and present with us in the Holy Spirit. So, may God who is Trinity bless us in the coming days of our meeting that we may discover that profound oneness that the world cannot give, but that God is making among us as we embrace a “transforming discipleship”.