

Faith and Order: a Unique and Particular Vocation (Moderator's Address)

I. Being in China

I want to begin by paying tribute to our Director and thanking him for his address; full, as ever, of wisdom and insight. He is a gift to us, in Faith and Order, and to the whole ecumenical movement. His knowledge of the history of our work is without parallel and his ability to reflect on the considerable work we have all been doing and to help us focus on the essential things is of inestimable value. I hope that you will be able to take the time to reflect further on his very helpful address.

I want to congratulate all of you for taking the extra efforts that were needed by many to get us here, together, and for those who have offered us generous hospitality in this place. It is my hope that being here, in this very particular context, will help us to understand and appreciate at the deepest level the ways in which Faith and Order's work has now to be done within the very different context of global Christianity.

When I was ten years old, my sponsor for my confirmation service as I made my own declaration of faith, gave me a book about a missionary called Gladys Aylward, someone who was called 'The Small Woman'. She was a missionary to China and her story, like so many of the saints we treasure, has been part of shaping my story. I little thought, then, that one day I too would travel to China and there discover a new place within which faith and mission should be shaped.

II. Our focus for the coming days

I have been reflecting, as no doubt we all have, on the work that we shall do in these days of meeting. I know that we cannot waste a moment of such a precious meeting, organised at such cost and offered so generously to each of us.

Since we last met, as a whole Commission, I have been keeping up to date with the work of the study groups, and been very actively involved in one of them particularly. I have also been, with other members of this Commission, part of the Theological Study Group of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, taking part in a Pilgrim Team Visit, co-editing and publishing with Fernando Enns the book *Walking Together. Theological Reflections on the Theological Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, and working hard to link what we are doing here with what that group is doing. I attended, again with others from Faith and Order, a conference at Bose on the Role of Women in the churches. I

participated in a meeting in Rome of a group of Canon Lawyers who are seeking and offering a new model for ecumenical work. I have attended and participated in, on your behalf, the WCC Central Committee and the visit of Pope Francis to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the WCC. We have held one Leadership meeting of Faith and Order, in October last year in Cyprus, to review our work and to plan for this meeting and our future. I have attended and spoken at the meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism and also the World Conference that took

place last year in Tanzania. I have worked, with the General Secretary, on a revision to the proposed Memorandum of Understanding. I have fulfilled speaking engagements in several countries and done my best to be useful. But each of these things has led me to ask what particular thing I, and all of us as Faith and Order, bring to the ecumenical movement. It is always easy to attend many things, to produce papers and speeches and publications, to network and post on social media and be present in places. It is easy to be caught up in the agendas and events of others, to enjoy them and to be enjoyed. But what is it that we do, that no one else does? What is our particular vocation in this movement, that no-one else will fulfil if we don't? More and more I want to focus on that, and to make sure that this is not lost in the midst of so much activity and productivity.

There are, of course, many things that could be written about justice and peace, about ecclesiology and about moral discernment. The whole world would not be able to contain the books. However, as the Director's address has already emphasised, there is no-one else doing precisely what we have been asked, by the churches, to do. We are being called to discover and to say some things that will help the churches in their task of calling one another to visible unity. In order to do that, it may not be that we need so much to focus on publishing great amounts of material or doing something comprehensive. It may be that we shall better serve the churches by producing synthetic statements or small pieces that can offer to the churches new ways of seeing our life together and the call of Christ to unity. It may be that a newly minted metaphor or phrase, a different way of putting it, a new perspective or a renewed hope will be what our churches most need right now. This is not to say that collections of papers will not be helpful, but it does mean that we must keep our eye on the main task before us and recognise that less may be more.

In the times in which we live, and in many of the places where we live, including within our churches, a very positive note is sounded now when we say the word 'diversity'. Today, and in many ways positively, we celebrate the diversity of humankind, culture and church - and we robustly reject any former sense that one kind of culture should dominate or that humankind should be rendered uniform. This is, I believe, a positive development. However, this very strong emphasis on diversity means that we sometimes lose sight of the things that we hold in common, and we become shy of voicing them for fear of seeming to be anti-diversity. It was pointed out to me recently that St Paul took diversity for granted in the churches he served. They were self-evidently communities in which labourers and villa owners, men and women, Jews and Greeks, citizens of the empire and slaves were brought together in one community. What he needed to emphasise, and what he felt called to witness to, was not their diversity, but their unity. It was their unity that God was bringing and unity that God in Christ was

creating among them. In a world like ours, in a global Christianity like the one we experience today, it is diversity that is treasured and diversity that wins applause. Our vocation, I suggest, is not to be, as some would say, to parrot an old-fashioned form of ecumenism, but to continue to witness to unity in these times. The call to unity is no less important and vital now than it was when Faith and Order was first formed or when the Gospels were first written, but it must now be spoken into a particular context.

So, our task, at this stage of our work in this Commission, is to focus on what we can say, and to best effect, to enable the churches to call one another to unity. No-one else in the world has quite this task, with this breadth of people gathered to do it. It is far from being the whole task of the

church or even the whole task of the ecumenical movement, but this is *our* task, and our challenge is not to be diverted from it.

As the Moderator, I would urge you as you work in your Study Groups and as you advise each other in response to reports, to keep asking, 'What is it that we can produce within the next two years that will be most helpful to the churches?' 'What might we contribute to the next WCC Assembly?' 'How can we best fulfil our unique and particular vocation?'. I would rather we produce one five-minute video than 50 books, if the video could most truly serve our churches. I would rather we produce work that is honest and faithful to the challenge, than anything that covers up our struggle. I would rather we produce something that people will talk about than will lay ignored. The challenge of this meeting of our Commission, I would suggest, as we move into the final stages of our work, is to keep before us the challenges of our unique vocation, of focus and communication.

III. Additional tasks

While here, we will also need to turn our minds to some matters of governance to secure a good and productive future for Faith and Order. We are asked to contribute to the WCC Assembly. We must reflect on the process of appointing a new Director, for when that time comes.

I hope that we will also want to engage in the important task of encouraging the staff of Faith and Order, who do so much to accompany our work and who carry wider responsibilities besides, with a World Council of Churches increasingly hard pressed. We will want to thank the General Secretary, Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tveit for his work, to welcome the Moderator of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, Metropolitan Geevarghese Coorilos and the new Director of CWME, Dr Risto Jukko and also the Deputy General Secretary who is responsible for Faith and Order, Father Professor Ioan Sauca. And we will want to greet and celebrate each other as we work together and make the most of meeting in this remarkable place. May Christ be alongside us during this time together, may the Spirit strengthen and inspire us and may God, the source of all our lives and all creation, bless us richly together.

Susan
Durber

