

Ecumenism in the 21st century: Theses for discussion

Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century
Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, 19 November, 2007

Rudolf von Sinner*

In my ecumenism class, I have started to ask students to do a short research on a church different from their own. Such churches are not difficult to find – as you might now, churches of all sorts and names abound in Brazil.¹ Among a number of aspects of a church's profile (worship, parish life, doctrine, mission, service etc.), I also asked about the church's position towards ecumenism. The response of a Baptist minister to the student's question was particularly interesting: He said he was in favor of dialogue between the churches, but strongly rejected ecumenism! I have found such posture quite often while teaching courses for ministers from a variety of churches. They know little about ecumenism, and if anything, they have a very negative view of it. This goes for historic Protestant churches in Brazil, among which Baptists form the majority (over 3 million declared members), and for Pentecostals, by far the largest and fastest growing group in Brazil among non-Catholics, but also for many Roman Catholics. Among the latter, indifference or a sense of superiority might be stronger than outright rejection, but there are still those who go for combat and continue to call most Protestant churches "sects".²

Thus, in the context in which I have been living continuously for nearly seven years, and with which I have been interacting for more than eleven years, ecumenism is either a non-existing or then a dirty word.³ However, in a course I taught recently for 52 theologians, mainly Baptists, Pentecostals and some Methodists, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics, it was visible how, after one year of regular meetings for intensive

* The Rev. Dr Rudolf von Sinner, a Swiss, is Professor of Systematic Theology, Ecumenism and Inter-religious Dialogue at the Lutheran School of Theology (EST) in São Leopoldo/Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, and its Dean for Postgraduate Studies and Research. Ordained in the Reformed Church of the Canton of Basel-Stadt, Switzerland, he now serves as a minister of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, where he is also a member of the Church Presidency's Advisory Group on Ecumenism. He has served on various committees and delegations of and to the WCC, including the Commission on Faith and Order (1999-2006). – I would like to thank Prof. Christine Lienemann-Perrin (Basel) and Prof. Nelson Kilpp (EST) for having gone through a first draft of this paper and having given very helpful comments.

¹ Cf. Gerd-Uwe Kliewer, 'Effervescent Diversity: Religions and Churches in Brazil Today', in *The Ecumenical Review* 57/3 (2005), 314-321.

² Cf. Pe. Flaviano Amatulli Valente, *A Igreja Católica e as seitas*. Perguntas e Respostas. S.l. [Niterói: Arquidiocese de Niterói], 1998, who affirms on p. 4 that "hopefully [this book] will be able to favor this authentic vaccination against the virus of the sects, which are causing so much harm to the United wanted by Christ". Controversely, a moderate and well informed panorama of Christian plurality is Jesus Hortal, *Guia Ecumênico: Informações, Normas e Diretrizes sobre Ecumenismo*, 3rd revised ed. (São Paulo: Paulus, 2003).

³ See, for instance, the following quote from the Apologetic Christian Center of Research (CACR), which affirms, among others, that "never a genuinely Protestant and/or Evangelical church can hold on to the biblical doctrines in one hand and with the other hold hands with the Roman Catholic Church and their heretical doctrines. This is confusion of the gravest kind!" <http://www.cacp.org.br/cat-ecumefacha.htm>. (14/08/2004).

classes, they had learnt to live and work together, not necessarily to agree, but to respect each other and to recognize they were all believers and followers of Christ. No longer did prejudice prevail, but relationship and a good degree of trust had been established, not least through an academic and, thus, reasonably objective study, accompanied by an authentic personal faith and sensitivity shown by the teachers. One of the group's main worries had been whether Lutherans were really believers or just abstract academics, and they were pleased and relieved to find out that Lutherans also know how to pray and live as Christians. They were astonished to find out so much about an ecumenism so different from what they had been taught, and wanted to know more, try more, do more. They wrote excellent ecumenical projects, like celebrating Christian festivals together, joining choirs for musical events and training, cooperating in social projects and the like. While they all acknowledged that, doctrinally, approximation was (and remained) difficult, they saw possibilities on the local level, especially in concrete cooperation for the common good or in doctrinally less central matters.

I am telling this story not only for you be able to locate me in my present context, but to underline one of the main arguments that run through my reflections: Grassroots ecumenism has to be fostered wherever possible, and to be mediated with formal, institutional ecumenism, and thus the mediating agents are particularly important.⁴ Among them, I do believe that ecumenical officers and teachers of ecumenism have a crucial role to play.

On reading the preparatory material, I have noted that there has been a certain shift in the focus of our work, from “a Reconfiguration of the Ecumenical Movement”, seemingly focused on more technical matters like dates and modalities of assemblies, to “Ecumenism in the 21st Century”, which takes a broader view on what ecumenism could and should be in this new century. Although I do believe that matters of rationalization of ecumenical events and institution are important, they should indeed be accompanied by a wide reflection on the nature and mission of the Ecumenical Movement as a whole, in its various facets and with its diverse agents. Indeed, in what follows I try to combine concrete proposals with that wider horizon as I see and propose it for discussion.

As such an ample theme is far too heavy for any individual to bear, I was reminded of Jeremiah, who said at being called “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly, I do not know how to speak” (Jer 1.6). But given that I was called to speak, I opted for presenting a number of theses which, of course, reflect the priorities I see from my own experience and reflection, but which I hope facilitate a discussion with all of you on the issues and visions for Ecumenism in the 21st century. At presenting theses, I am in good Lutheran company, but I can assure you that I'll be shorter than Luther in citing only twelve theses and not 95. Twelve is a good number, and quite meaningful biblically.

I had been asked to give a “creative contribution on the contextual challenges of the Ecumenical Movement and its organizations, which have to be born in mind by the Continuation Committee”.⁵ I have tried to contemplate this task. However, I have opted not to present yet another broad analysis of the present moment, as I feel they abound. I take it for granted that all of us have noted that the center of gravity of Christianity has

⁴ Cf. on “base ecumenism” Gerhard Tiel, *Ecumenismo e Reino de Deus* (São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1998); Julio de Santa Ana, *Ecumenismo e Libertação* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1987); Elias Wolff, *Caminhos do Ecumenismo no Brasil* (São Paulo; Paulus, 2001).

⁵ E-mail from Martin Robra, 4th September, 2007.

moved to the South⁶, that globalization and opening brings with it also fragmentation and fundamentalism⁷, that ecumenism is in crisis or in transition⁸, two movements which are usually intertwined – one can also ask whether ecumenism has ever not been in crisis, which positively speaking is a time of discernment and creativity –, and that religions can foster war or peace and that, thus, for peace among the nations, peace among the religions is necessary.⁹ Instead, what I have tried to do is to formulate a number of affirmations and proposals which I hope will be able to lead us into a fruitful discussion. Here's, then, the first thesis.

1. *There can be no Ecumenical Movement than the one built on trust – trust on God, who in Christ became human and is present through the Holy Spirit. Based on this trust, we can risk to trust each other. This makes us vulnerable. But it is the only way to build meaningful relationships. In many instances, however, is it precisely trust which is lacking, even outright competition is reigning and trust consciously being destroyed.*

Twenty years ago, Júlio de Santa Ana stated rightly that “it is exactly the lack of trust in faith itself” that “leads to isolationist attitudes that, beyond being expressions of religious narcissism, do not correspond with the dynamics of the Christian faith”.¹⁰ What this concretely means, at least in the Brazilian context, is a fierce competition between different churches which all invoke the name of Christ and the Triune God, but don't spend a thought on what it could mean that their neighboring church does the same. A survey carried out in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area in the early 1990s found that six new churches were being founded every single week.¹¹ Some are just the size of a garage, with maybe fifty members, others have expanded to hundreds or thousands of adherents. The names are getting more and more “creative”: Evangelical Church of the Abomination of Awry Life, Church Explosion of Faith, Evangelical Pentecostal Church of the Last Embarkation to Christ, Automotive Church of the Holy Fire, Evangelical Association Faithful even Below Water, Baptist Church Blast of Blessings, Evangelical Crusade of Pastor Waldevino Coelho the Supreme, Church of the Seven Trumpets of the Apocalypse, Igreja I. A. W. B. (I Also Want the Blessing), Evangelical Pentecostal Church Spit of Christ, and the like.¹² There are a number of sociological, spiritual and theological reasons why this is so, which we have no time here to enter into.¹³ But it is clear that, rather than trust, mistrust is being fostered. The “others”, even if Christians, are to various degrees considered enemies.

⁶ Cf. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁷ Cf. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Carmichael: Touchstone, 1998); Ulrich Menzel, *Globalisierung versus Fragmentierung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1998); Sérgio Costa, *Vom Nordatlantik zum “Black Atlantic”. Postkoloniale Konfigurationen und Paradoxien transnationaler Politik* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007).

⁸ Cf. Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*. (Geneva: WCC, 1994); David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

⁹ Cf. Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility. In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

¹⁰ Santa Ana 1987, 227.

¹¹ Rubem César Fernandes et alii, *Novo Nascimento: Os evangélicos na Igreja, em Casa e na Política* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad, 1998).

¹² Carlos Fernandes, Luciana Mazzarelli, ‘Igrejas para todos os gostos’ in *Eclésia*. 8/91 (2003), 44-49.

¹³ Cf. the attempt to understand the phenomenon of Pentecostalism and Neopentecostalism sociologically and theologically Richard Shaull and Waldo César, *Pentecostalism and the Future of the Christian*

However, living together both as humans and, more specifically, as Christians, presupposes trust.¹⁴ The ecumenical movement cannot work without trust, which is built up slowly through personal interaction. Ecumenism starts with and is sustained by personal relationships in the first place. Of course, nobody can be forced to trust. Trust involves risk and vulnerability. It is a kind of bet, and advancement of trust in relation toward an other whom we don't really know well enough yet, but from whom we expect that he or she will honor our trust, given that we all believe in the same Christ and Trinity. Although we also know that we are *iusti et peccatores*, saints and sinners at the same time, our trust in God liberates us for trust in our brothers and sisters. A "hermeneutics of trust", as lined out in Faith and Order's study on ecumenical hermeneutics, implies "to reckon with the possibility that the Spirit speaks within and through the others" and that "those who interpret the Christian tradition differently each have a 'right intention of faith'".¹⁵ It is possible that Christian groups and churches become partners and invest trust in each other because "it is ultimately God whom they trust to be able to comprehend the differences between them, intellectually heavy or nearly unbridgeable as they may be", in the words of Dietrich Ritschl.¹⁶

2. *To be able to relate meaningfully and trustfully to others, it is necessary that we – as Christians and as churches – adopt attitudes which are marked by honesty, humility, and mutual accountability. Any criticism of another has to start with self-criticism (cf. Mt 7.3-5). Confession of our sins against God and each other, and God's and our mutual forgiveness are central. Before we judge, we should seek to understand. Ecumenical space should provide a roundtable where Christians can dream together rather than stage a nightmare.*¹⁷

Dialogue, be it between Christians and their churches or between religions, is not an easy task, and a lot of patience is needed to be able to overcome the inevitable disagreements and conflicts that come up in the process. Mutual respect and openness, as well as a common search for truth, cooperation, and *convivência* ("conviviality", living together meaningfully as a learning, helping and celebrating community, in the words of Theo Sundermeier¹⁸) are crucial to "survive" and sustain dialogue. Between churches, "mutual accountability" has become a central term, interpreted by Olav Fykse Tveit as an "ethical attitude" towards each other.¹⁹ This implies to seek an ecumenical hermeneutics, both in reading and interpreting together the Gospel in its Tradition and

Churches. Promises, Limitations, Challenges (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). While sociological studies on the issue abound, theological reflections are still scarce.

¹⁴ Cf. Rudolf von Sinner, 'Trust and *convivência*. Contributions to a Hermeneutics of Trust in Communal Interaction', in *The Ecumenical Review* 57/3 (2005), 322-341.

¹⁵ Commission on Faith and Order, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*. Faith and Order paper no. 182, (Geneva: WCC, 1998), paragraphs 8 and 30.

¹⁶ Dietrich Ritschl, *Theorie und Konkretion in der Ökumenischen Theologie: Kann es eine Hermeneutik des Vertrauens inmitten differierender semiotischer Systeme geben?* (Münster: LIT, 2003), 57.

¹⁷ Cf. Musimbi Kanyoro, 'Dreams and Visions: Living the Deepening Contradictions of Ecumenism in the 21st Century', in *Ecumenism in the 21st Century*. Report of the Consultation Convened by the World Council of Churches. Chavannes-de-Bogis, Switzerland, 30 November to 3 December 2004, 58-65.

¹⁸ Theo Sundermeier, *Konvivenz als Grundstruktur ökumenischer Existenz*, in Wolfgang Huber, Dietrich Ritschl, Theo Sundermeier, *Ökumenische Existenz heute* (München, Chr. Kaiser, 1986), 49-100.

¹⁹ Olav Fykse Tveit, *Mutual Accountability as Ecumenical Attitude. A Study in Ecumenical Ecclesiology Based on Faith and Order Texts 1948-1998*, Doctoral Dissertation (Oslo: Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology, 2001).

in reading and interpreting each other as to our being the Church.²⁰ It also implies to set up, as a minimum, “rules of conduct” between the churches, as does the “Charta Oecumenica”, which seeks to “promote an ecumenical culture of dialogue and cooperation at all levels of church life”.²¹ The recent moves to create a “code of conduct” in terms of conversion and proselytism are also significant here. One such a “code of conduct” combined with a strong call to unity is to be found in Ephesians chapter 4.1-3: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

3. *Our relationships are meaningful only if they become concrete, with visible consequences. If I am being ecumenical at a WCC meeting, I should be so even more at home in my church. Such visible consequences can include prayer for each other in our common services, mutual offerings, providing space for the celebrations of churches which have no building available and the like.*

This can be very difficult, especially if my church resists ecumenism. In this case, trustful relationships with fellow Christians from other churches can help strengthen my commitment. Ideally, the legitimate diversity of churches, while still acknowledging they are churches – even if their precise ecclesial status and character might be questioned –, would be recognized through praying for them in the normal worship services of one particular church. Some years ago, the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches in Hamburg decided to include a prayer for each other in every liturgical celebration. I have no information as to whether and how this works, but I find it a very significant initiative which I hope will find followers. And as money is a carrier of many messages, also the one of interchurch solidarity, I still find Oscar Cullmann’s suggestion for a mutual offering highly relevant. In 1958, he called for such an offering between Catholics and Protestants, based on Galatians 2.9-10: “⁹ and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.¹⁰ They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.”²² Other examples are when local churches offer their buildings for use by churches who don’t have their own space for worship. It is by such actions that ecumenism becomes concrete and visible to all, far beyond specific meetings of experts or occasional common celebrations.

4. *The Ecumenical Movement is primarily a network of relationships between Christians, churches, agencies and ecumenical bodies. Within this network, the WCC has a unique role to play, both because of its historical importance and its inclusiveness – regionally, confessionally, and thematically. To maintain, widen and deepen this network, to foster relationships and to guarantee coherence is a most noble task for the WCC.*

²⁰ Commission on Faith and Order, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*. An instrument for an ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics (Geneva: WCC, 1998). Faith and Order Paper no. 182.

²¹ CEC/CCEE, *Charta Oecumenica: Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe* (Geneva: CEC; St. Gallen: CCEE, 2001), 4.

²² Oscar Cullmann, *Katholiken und Protestanten*. Ein Vorschlag zur Verwirklichung christlicher Solidarität (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1958).

The WCC has been able to count on experienced staff, many of which have been or have become important leaders both in their own traditions and in the Ecumenical Movement. Most of them are well trained academically, but even more so have been trained through exposure and relating to the most different people, churches and contexts. The *homo oecumenicus* and the *femina oecumenica* are most important facilitators for the processes of encounter, relationship and reflection as outlined above. To “broaden” and to “deepen” seems a most difficult, even contradictory task, as investing in one might reduce the possibility of the other. Still, both are necessary and most relevant moves in our times. Too narrow an Ecumenical Movement will not represent the width and diversity of today’s Christianity; too shallow an Ecumenical Movement will result in a mere fashion and not be sustainable.

5. *The Ecumenical Movement makes best sense when it is gathered around a common goal. This is traditionally defined as “the unity we seek”. But this aim, as such, tends to be very abstract and, even more so, subject to very different interpretations. Thus, more concrete goals, from practical cooperation to strengthening relationships between congregations and participation in the struggle for a more just, more democratic and more peaceful world, can gather Christians and churches, as well as other groups, and facilitate relationships.*

This is not to simply advocate an “Life and Work agenda” over against a “Faith and Order agenda”. Such dichotomy should be overcome very quickly, as practical and ethical issues are based on theological options and vice versa. Thus, if unity is not lived concretely, any conceptual reflections on it are in vain. On the other hand, a mere activism which does not seek to ground itself in faith, and which leaves out on reflecting theologically what it means to be, live and work together, will burn itself out after some time and not be able to sustain the togetherness reached by lived fellowship. In any case, the clearer the motivations and the concrete goals, the more plausible will ecumenism be for congregations and churches.

6. *The churches’ identity is best expressed in their mission. Whatever defines a church as such also defines it as missionary and ecumenical. The classical dimensions of martyrria, diakonia, leitourgia and kerygma in building koinonia show the various facets of mission as they define the church. The sending of the 70 (or 72) in Luke 10, as well as the encounter of Philip with the Eunuch (Acts 8) clearly show these various facets.*

The two stories mentioned are, in my reading, among the most intriguing for finding out about the purpose and mission of the Church. In the Eunuch’s story, Philip draws near (martyria) and explains the Scriptures (kerygma), resulting in the Eunuch’s baptism (leitourgia) and his inclusion into the Church (koinonia). In the sending out of the 70 in Luke, Jesus stresses the risk of mission as he describes the disciples as they are being sent like “lambs into the midst of wolves” (martyria), and being forbidden to take anything with them. They are to wish peace to the house they enter, share any food they will be served (koinonia), to cure the sick (diakonia) and, then only, proclaim that “the kingdom of God has come near” (kerygma). Whatever defines the Church, defines its mission, and whatever defines mission, defines the Church. Thus, a church is missionary not as something additional to its nature, but as intrinsic to it. As says the Faith and Order document on the Nature and Mission of the Church: “The mission of the

Church is to serve the purpose of God as a gift given to the world in order that all may believe (cf. Jn 17:21)” and “mission [...] belongs to the very being of the Church”.²³

Not rarely have I made the experience that dialogue about doctrinal issues is very difficult, but as it comes to pastoral issues, all of a sudden the Orthodox priest and the Lutheran minister feel very close to each other. Also reflecting on the way we prepare a sermon and the concerns we hold while doing this, as practiced in a working group during the 2002 Faith and Order Consultation on Ecumenical Hermeneutics in Strasbourg, led to very similar results among the ministers from various churches. Thank God there are a good number of examples where pastoral care, preaching the Gospel and even sacramental hospitality are extended beyond one’s confession or denomination in case of need. Now if what we do in pastoral care, in preaching and thus edifying the community is so similar, how can we say we have nothing in common doctrinally? This seems to be possible only where doctrine and pastoral practice are disconnected and the latter impeded to inform the former.

7. *One of the central problems of the Ecumenical Movement is the lack or malfunctioning of communication between its different actors. Even more seriously, large numbers of lay people and clergy have no information whatsoever on ecumenism, or else a highly distorted information. Thus, mediators are urgently needed to link up local and national, regional or global ecumenism. Ecumenical officers and teachers of ecumenism have an important role to play in this and should be better organized in networks. A “mobile Bossey” would also be a helpful instrument.*

It has become customary to hold courses of ecumenical formation parallel to large ecumenical, and also confessional meetings, like the WARC 24th General Council in Accra, Ghana, in 2004, and the Ecumenical Congress parallel to the WCC’s Ninth Assembly in Porto Alegre, in 2006.²⁴ These have proven to be excellent and even relatively cheap ways of extending the dynamics of such an Assembly and the presence of ecumenists from all over the world to students of theology and young persons in general, and of exposing the former to the local context. The problem is that such initiatives, important as they are, are isolated events and reach a limited number of people. How to enhance a more continuous and more widely accessible ecumenical formation in places and regions without an established structure for such formation? I believe that Bossey should become more mobile and hold ecumenical summer schools around the globe, in partnership with local churches and seminaries.²⁵ And, not least, those who are mediators of ecumenism by profession, the ecumenical officers and teachers of ecumenism, should be articulated in networks for exchange, training and, not least, encouragement and mutual strengthening.

8. *By building up a network of ecumenical facilitators, their organizations, churches and faculties could contribute through providing personnel and*

²³ Commission on Faith and Order, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Geneva: WCC, 2005), Faith and Order Paper no. 198, paragraphs 34f.

²⁴ See Rudolf von Sinner, ‘Report of the Ecumenical Congress 2006: Mission and Ecumenism in Latin America. São Leopoldo, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 12th-25th February, 2006’, in *Ministerial Formation* 107 (2006), 53-57; ‘A Time of Challenge and Sharing: The Ecumenical Congress on Mission and Ecumenism in Latin America’, in *The Ecumenical Review* 58/3-4 (2006), 280-286.

²⁵ Talking to the director of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, Fr. Dr. Ioan Sauca, during the days of this consultation, I realized this is being planned in collaboration with partners from various regions, as a “Bossey by extension”, both for students of theology and for lay people.

infrastructure for meetings, resources for study and prayer, translations and in-depth analyses, both contextual and theological. Thus, they would contribute both in content and methodology, as well as materially towards the Ecumenical Movement.

What I mean here by “ecumenical facilitators” goes beyond the already mentioned ecumenical officers and teachers of ecumenism to include people with strong communication abilities that are able to mediate grassroots ecumenism with more formal and institutional ways of living and reflecting upon ecumenism. As such people are made available for the Ecumenical Movement by their churches, and churches and related institutions contribute with infrastructure or the execution of specific tasks – like a seminary or faculty being asked to elaborate a specific study or comment on an existing one –, ownership and commitment are being enhanced. In any event, local communities should be included as much as possible through visits and the possibility of interacting with ecumenical gatherings.

9. *Thorough theological work is and remains central to the Ecumenical Movement. Although theological reflection is by no means restricted to the Faith and Order Commission, it is there that traditionally the most concentrated theological work has been done, in the most inclusive of all theological bodies, within which a number of important documents has been elaborated. However, it is questionable whether the current functioning of Faith and Order is adequate for today. Faith and Order could possibly work better in creating theological networks, funding small regional and theme-oriented consultations, and circulating and inviting work done by a variety of people and institutions around the globe.*

This thesis is based on over a decade of interaction with Faith and Order, during which I also served for a period as a member of the Plenary Commission, representing the Swiss Protestant Churches. What I can say from this very rich experience is being said out of critical solidarity. Thus, as I see it, Faith and Order work is too much centralized on a few people, and politicized as to its nominations – something of course not unknown to other sectors in the WCC and beyond. For the wide public, Faith and Order texts are virtually unintelligible; for academic theologians, they are often weak and bland; for church leaders, they are either too radical or too shallow, either rejected or adapted to what churches already believe and practice. On the other hand, many excellent theologians and theological institutions are and do feel being left out, as I have heard many times in many places. They are dissatisfied either with the meager academic quality or, conversely, the too abstract style of ecumenical theological work and documents. This is the problematic of all ecumenical documents that come out of a long drafting process; indeed, an ecumenical statement is a very specific literary genre, which only in limited cases has been able to create a wide discussion – the best known example is, of course, the so called Lima Document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.²⁶ Realistically speaking, it is practically impossible to have a meaningful dialogue in one meeting in seven years with 120 persons, many of which have not, or not much, interacted previously with their peers. As I have already stated in public during the Kuala Lumpur Plenary Commission Meeting in 2004, I believe a Standing Commission of 30 would be enough to steer the work of FO (as it in fact already does),

²⁶ Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), Faith and Order Paper No.111.

and the Plenary Commission could function in small consultations and commissioned studies and contributions, as a network of theologians invited for their competence, together with others who might not formally be members of the Commission, but have a contribution to make on specific issues.²⁷ A specific challenge seems to me to be the present overstating of moral issues, especially the discussion on the status of homosexuals in the church, their possible ordination and blessings of same sex marriages, which is built up to by many as to be the most divisive issue for the churches, more important than any doctrinal issues like baptism, eucharist and ministry. The discussion on sexuality and homosexuality is important and legitimate, but I see an urgent need to put it in its due and relatively inferior place within a kind of a “hierarchy of truths”.²⁸

10. There is the great danger of a continuous “clericalization” of the Ecumenical Movement. Although it is important that church leaders, usually clergy, own and participate in the Ecumenical Movement, lay people are those who most concretely act in the oikoumene, and where women are much more widely represented than among clergy in general and church leaders in particular. Thus, the strong lay participation and leadership that gave rise to the organization of the Ecumenical Movement in the 20th century and marked the efforts of the 1950s and 1960s should be renewed in appropriate ways.

I am aware that in many contexts, lay people have little time to spend in and for the church, not only men, but increasingly also women who are the grassroots backbone of all churches I know of. Still, they are the bearers of faith and also of ecumenism in the congregations and their working places, and thus deserve to be heard and to hear about the Ecumenical Movement and its whereabouts. On the other hand, clergy and church leaders are predominantly male and by this very fact represent only very partially the People (*laos*) of God.²⁹ The roots of the modern Ecumenical Movement lie very strongly in lay movements like the World Student Christian Federation and its affiliates.³⁰ It is crucial, I believe, to retrieve the enormous contribution the *laos theou* (1 Peter 2.10) can make toward ecumenism. Not least, mixed marriages are a testimony people are giving through their very lives, and can be of great “ecumenical importance” rather than just a problem for the churches involved.³¹ It is urgent that churches, all of which uphold family values, help rather than complicate such relationships.

²⁷ For a summary of the plenary discussion on the future of Faith and Order in Kuala Lumpur, see Thomas F. Best, ed., *Faith and Order at the Crossroads*: Kuala Lumpur 2004. The Plenary Commission Meeting (Geneva: WCC, 2005), Faith and Order Paper No. 196, 383-385. Speakers generally seemed to maintain the importance of having a proper Plenary Commission Meeting, but recognized the various problems implied, pressing for more than one meeting and/or a meeting earlier in the mandate. The latter suggestion has been taken up by the Standing Commission, which is planning to hold a Plenary Commission Meeting in 2009, in Buenos Aires.

²⁸ The new Faith and Order study on Moral Discernment might give an important contribution here.

²⁹ Cf. Jill Hawkey, ‘Mapping the Oikoumene: A Study of Current Ecumenical Structures and Relationships’, in *Ecumenism in the 21st Century: Report of the Consultation Convened by the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 2005), 66-80, at 73.

³⁰ Cf. Elisabeth Adler and Jonah Katoneene, ‘Laity’, in Nicholas Lossky et alii, eds., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*. 2nd ed. (Geneva: WCC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 658-664.

³¹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation “Familiaris Consortio” on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, of 22 November, 1981, no. 78: “Marriages between Catholics and other baptized persons [...] contain numerous elements that could well be made good use of and developed, both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution that they can make to the ecumenical movement. [...] Their common Baptism and the dynamism of grace provide the spouses in these marriages with the basis and

11. *There is a continuous and possibly growing importance of an “Assembly of the People of God”, i.e. a gathering of Christians in the line of the Padare (Harare 1998) and Mutirão (Porto Alegre 2006), alongside the business assemblies, and also special events for young people and students of theology, are important factors to give both local and global visibility to the event and facilitate the interaction between delegates and engaged Christians. Open participation in such spaces for people interested is extremely important and meaningful, and often paid by the participants themselves or their churches.*

I have often heard criticisms that WCC Assemblies tend to be inefficient and distorting the “real” business through its celebrative and participative character where it is not only a gathering of delegates, but of all who want to participate in order to get to know others, present themselves to others and get to know the Ecumenical Movement, in a kind of World “Kirchentag”. Although I understand the worries as to the efficiency of an Assembly’s business, I have always seen the celebrations and opportunities for participation as most important for ownership and transparency of the Ecumenical Movement and, not least, for delegates to have at least a taste of the local context, its hopes and worries and ways of being the church. It is most important that ecumenical institutions and events have open fringes, without losing their proper, concentrated work. The three layers of a business assembly, an organized listening and sharing process (like in the Ecumenical Conversations and the Mutirão in Porto Alegre), and a wide participation are already being practiced by WCC Assemblies, but probably need to be matured in terms of better interaction between the various layers.

12. *Within such a gathering of the People of God, the WCC could hold its Assembly, as could do Christian World Communions and international ecumenical organizations within the appropriate space. This would spare funds and energy and concentrate rather than disperse the churches’ attention and funding.*

Here now I support the more organizational issue of how to best integrate the diverse ecumenical engagements and institutions in order for the churches to be able to meaningfully participate. This is not my field of expertise, but it seems plain to me that synergies, both thematic and methodological, have to be facilitated wherever possible. From my own church, which is an active member in many confessional and ecumenical institutions, I can tell how difficult it is to keep track of what is happening and relating through it. The meager amount of returns to many questions sent out to the churches is a clear sign of the impossibility to keep up with all the demands, besides the daily challenges faced by the churches within themselves and in society. Ecumenical space and ecumenical business need to be combined in the most fruitful, participative and efficient way. New ways of representation need to be explored. Why, for instance, are all German churches members of the WCC, rather than being represented through the EKD? Why are namely Reformed, Lutheran and Anglican churches worldwide not represented through their World Communions? Why is there no bottom-up system of representation through the NCCs and REOs to the WCC? I am aware that all these

motivation for expressing their unity in the sphere of moral and spiritual values.” http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html (27/11/2007).

possible alternatives are not necessarily compatible, and that choices have to be made. But creative and daring solutions are needed now.

I would like to end where I have started in the first thesis: Trust is essential in all these plans and aspects. As we are sinners and saints at the same time, we theologically have to be trustful and distrustful of ourselves and others. But trust in God, which is faith (*pistis*), is what nurtures us as Christians, as churches and also as the Ecumenical Movement. As we read in the Peter's first letter: "Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.²² Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.²³ You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.²⁴ For 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls,²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever.' That word is the good news that was announced to you." (1 Peter 1.21-25)