

Changing Ecclesial and Ecumenical Context

7. Challenges on the way to unity: seeking an ecumenical response for today

The WCC's Common Understanding and Vision process offers a coherent and challenging vision: a broad fellowship of churches, committed and accountable to one another, seeking visible unity in their life and witness today.

After centuries of division, the churches recognize anew that they are *one* in Christ. Within the ecumenical fellowship they witness together, work against injustice, and seek to overcome their theological and historical differences. The churches within this fellowship have agreed to reflect and act together - to *stay together*, to encourage and challenge one another, even as they work to resolve remaining differences which hamper and test their fellowship.

But this fellowship of churches is challenged today as never before. One challenge comes from the rise of new communities seeking a "denomination-free" Christianity, something outside the historic forms of church life. Many such communities remain, by choice, outside any fellowship of churches. Others, including many rapidly growing churches, look for alternate ecumenisms, other experiences of common life outside the "mainstream" ecumenical movement. All these developments test the limits of the present fellowship of churches as expressed in the WCC.

Yet another challenge comes, paradoxically, from the sharpening of identities in churches within the traditional ecumenical movement. This may be a necessary response to a rapidly changing world, with its uncertainty about the future, loss of traditional social values and increasing secularisation. It need not be anti-ecumenical. But it often is: an emphasis on the local and familiar, a fear of what is different, financial stress - such factors call forth a "re-confessionalizing", a turning inward which leaves fewer resources for the ecumenical fellowship. Meanwhile many churches are growing and have new resources, but these are not always shared. And beyond the "symptom" of shrinking resources, there often lie deeper problems: a loss of confidence and enthusiasm for the very search for unity itself.

The churches, seeking a creative response to these challenges, are trying to understand the forces changing the world - and themselves - today. They are listening to each other in new ways, finding that within the fellowship there is room to ask each other even the most challenging questions about their understanding of the faith, and of each other as churches (cf. the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC). They are listening together to the concerns of those outside the fellowship. They recognize that today's religious plurality brings new challenges for their search for unity. And together they asking: Are we ready to be accountable to one another, to be visibly one in our life, witness and service to the world? Are we ready to discern the grace of God to transform ourselves and the world we live in?

The **first session** will review the churches' commitment to one another in working towards unity within the ecumenical fellowship, and explore the emergence, role and significance of "post-denominational" churches, and other alternate expressions of church, today.

The **second session** will address changing patterns of engagement (in priorities, time, energy, and funds) for the ecumenical movement, and how these affect the fellowship of churches.

The **third session** will focus on how the churches can reaffirm their fellowship and accountability to one another, as a basis for responding to these challenges today.

8. Emerging forms of ecumenism

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challenge one another, even as they work to resolve remaining differences which hamper and test their fellowship.

In recent years the ecumenical landscape has changed dramatically. New partners have emerged, and new partnerships have been formed. Churches meet in one-on-one bilateral discussions; a global "forum" may bring to the table a wider range of churches and groups, including some outside the traditional ecumenical movement; specialized ministries of (and sometimes outside) the churches for diakonia and development are emerging as strong forces, bringing their perspectives to the ecumenical movement.

In response to the new situation, many - churches within the fellowship, conciliar organizations in national, regional or international contexts, communions of churches and ecumenical ministries - are seeking new models and possibilities for living their ecumenical commitment in today's world. They are exploring a "reconfiguration" of the ecumenical movement, not just a rearranging of the present landscape but a new way of understanding of one body and many members (cf. Rom. 12:4, 1 Cor. 12:12, 1 Cor. 12:20)- and doing - ecumenism today.

The churches are seeking to face the new ecumenical situation courageously and creatively, in order to work and witness effectively today. They are trying to be engaged with the new ecumenical partners and specialised ministries, asking themselves: How can we, all of us, embody our ideals in one ecumenical movement? What form should our ecumenical vision take today? How God's grace may assist in facing the challenges of ecumenism today?

The **first session** will listen to the stories, examples and explore the range of emerging ecumenical expressions in local, national, regional and international contexts.

The **second session** will explore the ecumenical "reconfiguration" process. This effort seeks to clarify and restate the vision of the fellowship of churches within the WCC, for a broadly based ecumenical movement for today. Discussion would touch on the origin of the process, its goals, and the challenge it poses to traditional understandings and forms of the ecumenical movement.

The **third session** will focus on future possibilities for the ecumenical fellowship. It would seek to bring the reconfiguration process described above into dialogue with other visions, and other possible forms, for the ecumenical movement today.

9. Challenges to diakonia today: seeking an ecumenical response

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The churches together serving a world in need: this is a vivid sign of their faithfulness to Christ, whose ministry was marked by service to others, and one expression of their accountability to one another within the fellowship of churches. As they move beyond words to actions, their unity in Christ becomes visible, a "mark" of their common commitment to service which all the world can see.

Because it is rooted in the gospel, diakonia has always been central to the life of the churches. Within the fellowship of churches, diakonia has evolved to encompass the struggle for justice and sustainable communities, the commitment to upholding human dignity, and the vision of communities participating in the decisions affecting their lives. It has become global, even as it is rooted in local communities.

Moreover, the ecumenical landscape is changing dramatically, and not least in the field of diakonia. Some churches now respond directly to local needs, bypassing the ecumenical fellowship. A proliferation of new non-governmental organizations have emerged to offer services to those in

need. Diaconal agencies and specialized ministries, in an increasingly competitive environment, are pressed to demonstrate tangible - and often immediate - results. These changes have challenged the churches' understanding of their fellowship, and how it can be expressed in common service to those in need.

In response to the new situation, churches within the fellowship are seeking creative new models and possibilities for diakonia today. Together with the specialised ministries they are exploring new "configurations of caring" among the churches, the sources of diaconal support and expertise, and local situations of need. They hope to form true partnerships marked by respect, sharing of power, mutual accountability and a readiness to be vulnerable

The churches are seeking to face creatively the new possibilities - and challenges - for diakonia today in order to offer effective service to the world. They are trying to understand the new situation, and asking: How can we, as a fellowship of churches, act together with specialized ministries and local communities and organizations in responding to human suffering and need?

The **first session** will review the biblical grounding of diakonia, the traditional forms of the churches' common service to the world, and vis-à-vis the changing context in which diakonia is carried out today.

The **second session** will explore the emerging forms of diaconal service today, noting how diakonia and the search for justice are expressed in new forms of ministry. Initiatives towards new global partnerships for diakonia will be considered, including their relationship to - and impact on - the broader ecumenical fellowship.

The **third session** will focus on how the churches can continue their commitment to common service to the world, best suited to today's needs.

10. Memories and renewed quest for ecumenical formation

One of the major achievements in Christianity in the 20th century was the coming and staying together of some major church traditions that have witnessed the development and growth of the ecumenical movement. This

rich legacy of churches staying and working together towards the visible unity of the church could not have been possible without intentional and dynamic ecumenical formation and learning that have taken place in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, we live in a diverse and rapidly changing ecclesial and ecumenical context. Some of us have come to the assembly with deep memories of how we have been ecumenically formed. Others may be wondering what it means to be "ecumenical" and hence what is "ecumenical formation"? Still others are actively and intentionally involved in nurturing ecumenical consciousness as they confront the growing reality of religious pluralism and different kinds of injustices in their context. Moreover in the scriptures we are admonished to be transformed by the renewal of our minds by discerning the will of God (Rom. 12:2) and to seek God's grace.

Ecumenical formation does not happen in a vacuum. The context, human condition and people's experiences influence different kinds of initiatives in ecumenical formation. Major changes in ecumenism, demographic shift in global Christianity, post-denominationalism, religious plurality and interfaith education, call for an ecumenical conversation. In addition, rapid growth of new ways of expressing Christian spirituality and proselytism, in some places, create renewed quest for exploring creative ways of doing ecumenical formation and to redefine our understanding of ecumenism and transformation.

Churches, in different contexts, need to learn from one another and to articulate for themselves what it means to be ecumenical in relation to the gospel message of a just world and the reign of God.

The **first session** will be dedicated to recall into memory how some of the participants have been ecumenically formed (people's experiences) in different contexts and how that has shaped their understanding of ecumenical formation.

The **second session** will be an opportunity for exploring how Christians are engaged in ecumenical formation today and the major challenges they face in their context, giving adequate space to youth, women, people with disabilities and indigenous people who represent a wide variety of local contexts.

The **third session** will focus on identifying the spirit of renewal and transformation in the church that will be the basis of creating realistic models of ecumenical formation in the 21st century in different contexts.

11. Youth transforming the ecumenical landscape

The ecumenical movement started with young people - in the Student Christian Movements, YMCA, YWCA - taking leadership and daring to challenge the churches. What sustained them was a passion to bring the gospel to the whole world through mission, social action and transformation of the churches. Youth have a special capacity of speaking with a prophetic voice and bringing about change. They are especially called, like the young prophet, to transform the world - to "pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). This reminds us of the important role youth can and should play in the ecumenical movement of the 21st century.

Among young Christians, faith in God and the strong need for spirituality very often do not go together with their presence and activity in the churches. Churches in most parts of the world witness decline in youth attendance and engagement. This questions the relevance of the churches' ministry and challenges the way the churches place themselves in the world today.

Deep commitment of many young people to transforming the world results in significant involvement in various social movements. However, the youth's desire for a united, just and caring *oikoumene* too often does not find expressions within the churches and ecumenical organizations. This questions the relevance of the ecumenical movement itself.

This ecumenical conversation will explore the youth dreams and visions for ecumenism in the 21st century. It will provide a space for discussion on how young people, and young theologians among them, can and are contributing to the quest for the visible unity of the church. The conversation will attempt to capture the youth spiritualities

characterized by impatience with injustice, courage, openness and passion for the transformation of the churches and the world. Although led by youth, it is not meant to be exclusively for young people. It aims at engaging participants in an honest and constructive dialogue, also across generations.

The **first session** will focus on youth's aspirations and challenges faced in their churches, organizations, societies. Time will be given to share experience and youth perceptions of the world, churches and the ecumenical movement.

The **second session** will explore what young people are doing to transform the churches and the ecumenical movement. It will highlight successes but also failures and frustrations. It will be an opportunity for participants to exchange good practices and lessons learned.

The **third session** will be looking into the future asking the following questions: How to ensure the vitality, visibility and impact of the ecumenical youth movement on the churches and the world? How can ecumenical youth organizations strengthen the common Christian identity and bonds of solidarity among young people globally? How to reclaim and creatively utilize the youth spirituality from the origins of the ecumenical movement in the quest for the Church and *oikoumene* that God desires?