

Global Christian Forum

Summary of the Report to the Ninth Assembly¹

At the eighth assembly (Harare, December 1998), a proposal for a forum of Christian churches and ecumenical organizations was presented and discussed in policy reference committee I and in plenary. The assembly encouraged the central committee to continue the process of consultation, and affirmed further work towards the goal of a more effective, more sustaining, more inclusive network of relationships.

The "forum proposal" as it came to be known, evolved out of the reflection process on the Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches (CUV). The proposal was to explore the potential of a forum that would reflect a broader pattern of relationships than the fellowship of WCC member churches. Such a forum should bring together churches participating in the ecumenical movement, e.g. WCC member churches, the Catholic church, other churches, and Evangelical, Pentecostal and Independent churches, as well as ecumenical and para-church organizations. A consultation was held at Bossey in August 1998, which produced the document that went to the Harare assembly. At this consultation a small continuation committee was set up, which became responsible for the process after the Harare assembly.

1. Process of consultation

The following meetings have taken place in the period from the eighth to the ninth assembly :

September 2000 Meeting between the continuation committee and a group of Evangelical and Pentecostal leaders from around the world, to discuss common interest in the

¹ The issue of a global Christian forum is on the agenda of the policy reference committee, which will propose action to be taken by the assembly. Copies of the full report can be obtained from the secretariat of the policy reference committee.

forum proposal. Venue: Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, USA.

June 2002 First international forum consultation of about sixty participants from many parts of the world, representing all the main Christian traditions, with a relative majority of Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Independent participation (about 50 percent). Venue: Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, USA.

May 2004 Asia consultation on a forum, bringing together about fifty participants representing all the main Christian traditions in Asia, with a relative majority of Evangelical and Pentecostal participation. Venue: Hong Kong, China SAR.

August 2005 Africa consultation on a forum, bringing together about sixty participants representing all the main Christian traditions in Africa, with a relative majority of Evangelical, Pentecostal, and African Instituted churches participation. Venue: Lusaka, Zambia.

At the meeting in September 2000, it was proposed to use the name *global Christian forum*, as a designation acceptable to all the Christian traditions participating in the process.

The continuation committee has met annually in the period from the eighth to the ninth assembly. The composition of the committee has increased from seven to eleven members, and the committee has become more representative of Evangelical and Pentecostal participation in the forum process.

In 2003 the continuation committee worked out an action plan for the period 2004-2007. Following an advice of the June 2002 consultation, it was decided to hold consultations in four major regions of the world (Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America) in 2004-2006, and to

envisage a global "forum event" in 2007, as a culmination of the process.

2. Provisional purpose

The participants at the first forum consultation (June 2002) discussed in some depth the basis for participation in a global Christian forum and offered a provisional purpose statement:

To create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and interchurch organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in his divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.

In the spirit of John 17:21 " that all of them may be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me" and because of our faith in a reconciling God (2 Cor. 5:18-21) a forum could pursue the following:

- deepen our commitment to God's word and mission in the world;*
- enhance our understanding of contemporary expressions of Christian mission;*
- pursue principles and practices that enable us to deal freely, responsibly and peaceably with our Christian differences and distinctive qualities;*
- engage in theological reflection in areas of mutual concern;*
- strengthen the wholeness of the church by encouraging communication and cooperation; and*
- foster relationships that may lead to common witness.*

This provisional statement has been discussed in subsequent consultations, and will be shared for discussion at future meetings. It is not submitted to changes at each stage of the process. Comments and suggestions are noted, with the intention to design a way whereby an improved formulation can be offered, possibly at the time of a future global forum event.

3. Progress made

3.1. All the meetings held so far, as well as the many discussions that have been going on in various circles, point to a general perception that a global Christian forum is timely. Time has come to move beyond the 20th century divide of "ecumenical" and "evangelical". A forum responds to an expectation, and this is so on both sides.

3.2. In all the meetings, the participants have enthusiastically supported the forum concept. They have underlined the importance of a forum as a *process*, that should involve a steadily increasing and widening range of churches and Christian organizations, and their representatives.

3.3. The process has enabled people from Christian traditions who have not been in conversation with each other before to meet and enter into dialogue. A global Christian forum is fulfilling its purpose of creating a new space for ecumenical - evangelical encounter, a space where trust can grow.

3.4. The notion of a forum has contributed to creating new relationships. A crucial element in all the meetings has been the exercise of sharing the faith journeys and the stories of the faith communities by the individual participants (with sixty people around the table this can take more than a full day !). This has proven to be a powerful means of discovering the faith convictions that are held in common, and overcoming mutual prejudices.

3.5. All the consultations have benefitted from local experiences reported by the participants, and have in turn contributed to discussions and initiatives at regional and local levels. In Asia as well as in Africa, the meetings have already resulted in a regional follow-up.

3.6. A forum is supported by the Christian world communions, which in various ways have participated in the meetings. The conference of

secretaries of Christian world communions has received progress reports on a forum, and has stated its support in writing.

3.7. It has been possible so far to avoid any direction of the forum process that could have led to the creation of a new organisation or institution, or any concept of "membership", or the formation of a new fellowship of churches over against existing ones. A forum continues to be based on participation, with no other structure than a committee and a small secretariat.

4. Difficulties encountered

4.1. The issue of a forum has been a much longer process than was initially thought. In the 1998 proposal it was expected that a high-level, global forum meeting of 150-250 participants could be held within two years after the Harare assembly.

4.2. Until now, several major Pentecostal organisations and churches have declined invitations to participate, e.g. the World Pentecostal Fellowship, the World Assemblies of God, the Assemblies of God (USA). The World Evangelical Fellowship has been involved informally.

4.3. It has not always been possible to expect or obtain official representation of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and organisations. Invitations have sometimes to be addressed to individuals, who at best are able to work out some degree of informal understanding with their constituency about their participation.

4.4. The limitations of representation of WCC member churches on the continuation committee have an adverse effect on their sense of ownership of a forum and their commitment to it.

4.4. The discussions have generally not gone beyond some preliminary exchanges on the understanding of the church and its mission. In order to go deeper into dialogue, it will be necessary to develop a

common agenda. It can be expected that when controversial issues come on the table, it will become more difficult to stay together.

4.5. The idea of a global Christian forum is not well known in the churches. The negative side of its light operating structure is that the mechanisms for effective communication and information are missing.

4.6. A forum has no financial basis. For each activity, funds have to be raised, and the number of churches and organisations which contribute has remained limited.

5. A forum and the WCC

In all the meetings and consultations, as well as in the correspondence and in the information on a forum, the continuation committee has explained the role of the WCC as the initiator and sustainer of the process. While this had sometimes to be done with care, it has never been hidden. From its side, the central committee has acknowledged the necessary independence of the continuation committee. It is within this understanding that the continuation committee has understood the space it was given, as the opportunity to be an autonomous body fully responsible for the task entrusted to it, and accountable to all the participants in a forum.

All along the process thus far, there has been regular reporting on a global Christian forum to the governing bodies of the WCC. In order for a forum to advance, it is essential that the WCC continue to participate, and that it does so in the perspective of the CUV, that is, as a participant together with others. Yet the role of the WCC has been distinctively different from that of other participating bodies, because it has not only launched the process, but also provided staff support and resources. The progress of the idea of a forum up to this point is largely due to the willingness, and the ability, of the WCC to give this level of assistance.

6. Future plans

At its most recent meeting, in August 2005, the continuation committee has decided to carry on with the process as outlined in the 2004-2007 action plan, namely to hold two more meetings in major regions in 2006, and to convene a "global forum event" in 2007 :

Europe	June 2006 (timing is tentative)
Latin America	November 2006 (timing is tentative)

These two consultations will basically have the same design as the previous ones. Contacts will soon be taken with the respective REOs and other regional bodies.

Global event	November 2007 (timing is tentative)
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The global event is in principle the implementation of the original forum proposal. However, its shape, composition, content, and size require further reflection, discussion, and input from the various churches and organizations participating in the forum process, in light of the experiences that have been gained. The continuation committee has developed some broad guidelines :

- a) It should be an opportunity of consolidation of all that will have been achieved by that time .
- b) It should include all the main traditions of the Christian family worldwide. If any one of these is not prepared to join, the meeting should be postponed until a more favourable time.
- c) It should be representative of leadership at a significant level. Clarity and agreement on the level of representation is one of the major points for further reflection and discussion.
- d) The main argument for calling together a global forum of representatives of all the Christian traditions is that such a "space" for encounter and fellowship currently does not exist.
- e) The meeting should promote Christian unity, and be a "hope-giving" event for Christians, churches and the world.
- f) The choice of the venue of the meeting will have important implications. A set of criteria needs to be developed in order to decide on the venue.

The continuation committee sees the global event as the time for it to give an account of the work done, and to hand back its responsibility.

7. Action by the ninth assembly

It is hoped that the ninth assembly of the WCC will :

- receive the report on a global Christian forum, express its views on the process "from Harare to Porto Alegre", and offer guidance for the future plans ;
- recommend to the member churches to participate in such a forum and provide support, including financially ;
- recommend the participation of the WCC in the global forum event of November 2007 ;
- consider the implications of a global Christian forum for the process of reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement, and provide recommendations for the relationships between the two processes.

Members of the continuation committee : Rev. Dr W. Granberg-Michaelson, WCC ; Rev. Fr M. Gundiaev, Moscow Patriarchate ; Rev. Dr Han Sang-Ehil, Church of God (Cleveland, USA) ; Rev. Richard Howell, Evangelical Fellowship of India ; Dr Musimbi Kanyoro, World Young Women's Christian Association ; Metropolitan Mar Gregorios, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch ; Rev. Kuzipa Nalwamba, United Church of Zambia ; Mgr John Radano, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity ; Dr Cecil M. Robeck, Pentecostal ; Rev. Sarah Rowland Jones, Anglican Communion ; Dr George Vandervelde, Institute for Christian Studies.