

## Joint Consultative Group WCC-Pentecostals (JCGP) 2000-2005

### Excerpts from the Report to the Ninth Assembly<sup>1</sup>

Created on the basis of a decision taken by the Harare assembly of the WCC, the Joint consultative Group (JCG) met for the first time at the Abbey of Hautecombe, France, 19-23 June 2000, where it adopted the following purpose for its work:

Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in response to the invitation of the eighth assembly of the World Council of Churches, we have come together. We believe the purposes of our group are:

- to search for better ways of understanding one another ;
- to look for new opportunities for mutual learning and action;
- to share our experience of Christian witness with one another;
- to discuss our challenges with the hope of moving beyond them;
- to share what we will learn with our respective churches, leading to our affirmation of the common life in the Spirit.

*Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:19-20)*

The following annual meetings took place in Quito, Ecuador (2001), Seoul, Korea (2002), Cleveland, TN, USA (2003), Johannesburg, South Africa, (2004) and Cairo, Egypt (2005).

At its last meeting, the JCG worked and agreed on two texts which summarize some common trends discerned in the dialogues and important

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<sup>1</sup> The JCGP 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 or the WCC's Office of Church and Ecumenical Relations.

challenges which remain, and formulated recommendations to the Porto Alegre assembly. These three texts are reproduced below:

### **Affirming Our Faith Together**

Since 2000, in response to the mandate of the 1998 WCC assembly held in Harare, Zimbabwe, the Joint Consultative Group has brought together representatives from a range of WCC member churches and from a range of Pentecostal churches from around the world. When we members of this group first came together, in Hautecombe, France, we came with our fears, stereotypes and apprehensions, as well as with our confidence and hope. As we have prayed together, listened together to the proclamation of the word of God, engaged in Bible studies and in dialogue with one another, we have enjoyed a genuine sense of community with one another.

Our time spent in prayer and Bible study and our testimonies of the work that God has done and continues to accomplish in our lives have revealed that each of us shares a deep, personal devotion to God, and each of us has manifested a desire to act according to the will of God. We have been able to address many of the stereotypes that have contributed to our divisions, misunderstanding and misconceptions. We have changed many of the false images about one another, and we have set to rest many of our apprehensions.

We have come to realize that we have much more in common than we had realized when we first came together. All of us understand that there is only one church. It is not our church, but rather, the church of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is He who has called us together, and has called us to be the body of Christ, and it is to him that we give our love, devotion and allegiance. We recognize him as the head of the church. It is also the case, that through our mutual acceptance of one another in our prayer and work together (Eph. 4:2-3), we have come to recognize that we are all Christians. We have confessed Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Saviour according to the scripture and we have sought to follow him. We have called upon the Holy Spirit, the giver and sustainer of life, to be with us throughout the journey. We have also

come to see the light of Christ in one another, and therefore are, as St Paul says, "members of one another" (Rom. 12:5).

Each time we have gathered together, we have prayed together. In our prayers, we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit, and we have prayed to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who hears our prayers. We have also made it a regular practice to read and study the scriptures together. We find in the scriptures an unparalleled authority for the ongoing life of the church and its members. We have been taught, challenged, strengthened, encouraged and comforted by the words of scripture as they have been inspired in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Though not always in agreement about the ways and methods of reading and interpreting the scriptures, we continue to grow in our appreciation of the varieties of ways in which scripture is understood. We are not yet in agreement on the meaning of all biblical texts, but have come to understand that these writings, inspired by the Holy Spirit, bear richer meanings than we originally thought. We have been able to learn from one another throughout our Bible studies.

In our time together, we have been touched by the richness of the diversity among us. We come from many places. We come with varied histories. We come from many denominations with different expectations. We come from many races and ethnic communities, and we come as older and younger men and women. We have therefore come to appreciate the gifts that each other brings to the dialogue. We have come to recognize more fully the diversity that fills the church of Jesus Christ. We have come to see that place must be made for each one to share within the whole body that which God has given to him or her (1 Cor. 12ff.). Our work together has been marked by this sharing, and our report of our meetings has been touched in some way by each of us. We believe that before God, we stand as equals, regardless of our differences and diversity. We recognize that while the various gifts that we bring are important, their value is enhanced by the realization that together, they contribute as a whole to the one body of Christ.

All of us agree that we are to proclaim the goodness of God and the good news of the gospel to the world. Through what God has done for us in the life, death and resurrection of his Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ,

we have been given new life in Christ, and therefore have gained entry into the presence of God in a new way. We have been empowered for the life and work that God has so generously given to us and have hope for the future. There can be a particular emphasis upon proclaiming this message of salvation and hope through Jesus Christ by word of mouth. Another emphasis is the demonstration of the reality of this message through the testimony of signs and wonders. Alternatively there can be an emphasis upon proclamation through a ministry of consistent living or by ministering through various acts in the world that are performed in the name of Jesus Christ. Most would embrace more than one emphasis. We have come to appreciate that, while these different methods originate in the example of Jesus Christ, our practice must always be tested against Christ's ministry. We realize, therefore, that we need to become aware of the various forms by which the gospel is proclaimed and should develop, for the sake of our dialogue, a method of discussion that is intent on gaining knowledge rather than criticizing one another.

In our discussions, it has become clear to us that the present divisions in the Christian community hinder the work and witness of the church in the world. These divisions confuse those who look to the gospel for hope. We feel many Christians, including ourselves have failed to live up to the common calling to be sisters and brothers in Christ, who love one another, submit to one another, and seek to build up the entire body of Christ. The central message of the gospel is that all be healed and reconciled to God and to one another through Jesus Christ. We recognize our own culpability in not heeding this message to its fullest.

The question of the discernment of the Spirit has emerged on several occasions in our discussions. How do we know if it is the Spirit that is at work in us and in our communities, or whether what we claim to be the Spirit working in us is not of human interests? How do we know where the limits of our faith and our actions should be placed? We were in agreement that these questions are important, but also very difficult to answer. We have not yet agreed on a common understanding of the criteria that might be used to discern the Spirit and set boundaries, nor have we always been clear about who has the authority

to do so. We recognize that Christ has taught us not to judge one another (Matt. 6), while at the same time the scriptures call us to discern the spirits, to test the fruits of our actions, and to enter into discipline within the Christian community. As we have listened to each other, we have come to understand the centrality of these issues for our dialogue, and the necessity to continue wrestling with these questions.

### **Issues That Challenge Us Further**

Throughout our time together, we have discussed the various teachings of our respective churches and the perceptions that we have of one another. Even though we have met regularly for the last six years, the group has just begun to address the many differences and concerns that were raised at our first meeting. What has also become clear is the diversity within each respective group, WCC and Pentecostal; the representatives from the World Council of Churches member churches held differing understandings of specific theological teachings, as did the representatives from among the Pentecostals. This fact added to the richness of our discussions and the complexity of ordering our meetings.

The following are among the areas which need to be addressed more extensively by the JCG in the future:

1. Inadequate understandings of one another still exist and need to be explored more fully. What is perhaps more relevant, though, is the need to share what we have learned from one another with our respective communities.
2. There were initial discussions on the issue of mission and evangelism. The importance of dialogue between churches concerning evangelism, respect for one another's churches, and proselytism cannot be over-estimated. The group is committed to addressing the tension among us and exploring ways that we might be able to work together in mission.
3. The gifts of the Holy Spirit (*charismata*) are of interest to many members of the group. What are they? How are they defined? How are

they manifested? How are they recognized?

4. The sacraments emerged as an area for further discussion. The churches recognize the significance of the sacraments in various ways. What is the role of the sacraments in the life of the church?
5. Even though the group dedicated much time to the study of scripture, more work needs to be done with regard to the different ways in which scripture is interpreted and understood.
6. Spirituality was a main theme throughout our work over the past six years. Our discussions looked at the variety of ways in which the work of the Spirit is discerned. How do we discern the work of the Spirit? What criteria have our respective churches developed for determining the work of the Spirit?
7. And finally, the over-arching question that emerged during our discussions addressed the extent to which World Council of Churches member churches and Pentecostal churches see each other as "churches". In our discussions on Christian unity, we asked: What is the nature of the church? Who are the members of the church? What is church and what is not? What or who is the ultimate authority in the church? What are the criteria by which an individual church recognizes another as church?

These issues are presented by our group to those who will take up the task of continuing this conversation. The Joint Consultative Group sees these issues as the emerging concerns that will help guide the future dialogue between the World Council of Churches and Pentecostals.

#### **Recommendations to the Ninth Assembly**

1. We **recommend** the **continuation of the JCG** with the goal of building relationships through ongoing theological conversations and studies (focusing on themes of the nature of the church, mission, understanding charismatic gifts, sacraments and the nature of scripture, as well as others as they arise) with the hope of delving deeper into our respective theologies, and the education of our respective constituencies.

The JCG should also endeavour in its work to respond to and cooperate with WCC commissions (such as Faith and Order and the commission on World Mission and Evangelism) and other programmatic areas whenever possible.

2. We **recommend** the **expansion of this type of dialogue** in the following ways:

a) At the level of regional, sub-regional and national councils of churches whose purpose could be similar to that of the JCG, namely, to build relationships through education and theological conversations. At each level, this dialogue could take place with the cooperation of the respective ecumenical bodies (i.e., the regional ecumenical organizations). The WCC should take an initiating role in this dialogue by contacting these councils of churches to encourage dialogue and cooperation, and provide the names of members of the JCG in the region to act as resource persons who would be willing to share their experiences.

b) Through initiatives by individual members of the JCG, preferably through their respective ecclesial affiliations.

c) Through ongoing dialogues with the Christian world communions (such as the bilateral theological consultations).

d) By engaging and cooperating in diaconal and practical work together through the various Christian development and aid organizations and Bible societies. We recognize that this work is already taking place in some regions.

e) Through dialogue within academic institutions via:

1) consultations on Pentecostalism and ecumenism (which would include academics and denominational leaders);

2) the exploration of ways to introduce the study of ecumenism into the training programmes of Pentecostal seminaries;

- 3) the exploration of ways to introduce the study of Pentecostalism into the training programmes of ecumenical and denominational institutions of member churches; and
- 4) publication of journals (whereby the work of Pentecostal scholars would be included in theological journals, and Pentecostals would continue the development of their own ecumenical journals) and websites with the purpose of advancing theological studies and educating all constituencies.

3. We **recommend to Pentecostal churches** that they:

- a) foster intra-Pentecostal dialogues (specifically a North/South dialogue);
- b) encourage dialogue with WCC member churches at local and national levels; and
- c) encourage dialogue between Pentecostal churches who are members of the WCC and who are not members of the WCC.

4. We **recommend that the WCC and its member churches:**

- a) plan consultations on Pentecostalism and related themes and include Pentecostals in the participation and planning of these consultations as part of their programmatic work;
- b) build relationships with Pentecostal churches at local and national levels; and
- c) enable more Pentecostals to become members of the commissions and advisory groups of the WCC and take a greater part in its programmatic work.

#### **Participants in the JCG**

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