

CALLED TO BE
THE ONE CHURCH

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Faith and Order at Crete

*Report of the 2009
Meeting of the Plenary Commission*

Edited by John Gibaut

Faith and Order Paper No. 212



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

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Preface

It is an honour to introduce the Report of the 2009 meeting of the Plenary Commission on Faith and Order. This volume witnesses to the vibrancy, breadth and depth not only of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC), but also of global, multilateral theological ecumenism.

In the spirit of the 2006 WCC Assembly's statement on ecclesiology, "Called to Be the One Church", the 120 members of the Commission on Faith and Order, together with thirty-seven guests, consultants, and younger theologians, gathered at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, 7-13 October 2009. Their work took place in the context of daily prayer and Bible study. They carried out their work in plenary sessions, as well as in twelve small working groups. They gathered in confessional and regional caucuses, during which particular concerns and contexts were shared.

The members of the Commission with our Moderator, His Eminence Metropolitan Vasilios of Constantia, together with guests and consultants, met the bishops, clergy and faithful of the local Orthodox dioceses, parishes and monastic communities of the Church of Crete. His All Holiness, Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch, graced the first plenary session of Commission with his presence and delivered the opening address. He welcomed the Commission to the Orthodox Academy of Crete, of which he is patron, and gave his blessing to the work of the Faith and Order commissioners in Crete.

Spirituality was a major feature of this Plenary Commission, particularly the Opening and Closing Prayer services. Morning Prayer was celebrated daily in the small working groups. The three celebrations of Evening Prayer were offered by members from the Latin America, Africa, and Asia regions. The material from the 2009 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was used extensively. The members of the Commission participated in celebration of the Divine Liturgy at the local cathedral of the diocese of Kisamos and Selinon on Sunday morning.

The General Secretary of the WCC, Rev. Dr Sam Kobia, preached at the Opening Prayer and brought greetings at the opening session. The General Secretary-elect, Rev. Dr Olaf Fykse Tveit, himself a member of

the Plenary Commission, addressed the Commission on the second day, and underlined the significance of the work of Faith and Order for the WCC and the wider ecumenical movement.

Major plenary presentations

In addition to the work done by Commission members, guests and consultants in the smaller working groups, there were many plenary presentations which both reflected and guided the work of the Commission, beginning with the opening address of the Ecumenical Patriarch. His address developed the Commission theme in terms of “Unity as Calling, Conversion and Mission”.

The Commission’s theme, “Called to Be the One Church”, was addressed by five speakers.

- Dr Minna Hietamäki (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland), a younger theologian, spoke on the challenge and opportunity of unity and diversity in *koinonia*.
- In the aftermath of apartheid, the Prof. Maake Masango (Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa) drew our attention to the South African understanding of visible unity as organic unity, and as part of the healing of the divisions created by apartheid.
- Rev. Dr Marianela de la Paz Cot (Episcopal Church in Cuba), looked to the unity of the church in relation to its inclusivity, opening spaces across the religions in Cuba, where culture is the key as an “access code” to dialogue.
- Sr Prof. Maria Ko Ha Fong (Roman Catholic Church) spoke of the necessity of kingdom-centered ecclesiology and vision of Christian unity in the Asian context, where Christians are a minority.
- H.E. Metropolitan Prof. Dr Gennadios of Sassima (Ecumenical Patriarchate) said that “Called to be the One Church” presents to us two callings: the first one is imperative to all of us, affirming our faith and belief in the One who constitutes the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The second, coming from the Church, is an authentic prerogative, confirming that we are all members of this One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and we confirm our belonging to our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Faith and Order study projects

- *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (TNMC): The study on *The Nature and Mission of the Church* was discussed in plenary and in working groups.

A clear message that we received was about the place of *context*. One of our speakers was H.E. Metropolitan Dr Geevarghese Mar Coorilos from India (Syrian Orthodox Church), the current moderator of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). He spoke passionately about taking context seriously when we do ecclesiology, a clear criticism of the methodology used in TNMC. His Eminence's presentation was excellent and provocative. But what was interesting was the response from the commission to his presentation: almost a 5-minute ovation. Clearly, a nerve had been touched.

The role of the working groups was to offer an assessment of TNMC from a different perspective from the questions posed to the churches. Like the responses to it, received by Faith and Order, the responses received from the commissioners will be used to revise and reorder the text. One of the things that is constant in them all is the place of context.

- *Sources of Authority: Tradition and traditions*: The task in the working groups was twofold: to address questions raised thus far concerning what authority the sources of the early Church holds today in our churches, and to suggest primary issues which ought to be considered for a follow-up consultation in 2011.

Concerning the first task, working groups were given excerpts from Ambrose of Milan (4th century CE), Gregory the Theologian (4th century CE) or Isaac of Ninevah (7th century CE). Group members reflected on how the particular patristic text might be received in their churches in general, and in their local ecclesial context in particular, as a source of authority. Regarding the second task, working groups proposed possible angles from which a second consultation might advance the Cambridge consultation findings. Questions answered by group-members concerned aspects of authority such as the acknowledgement of sources, the appeal to sources, and the role which sources of authority play in shaping ecclesial identity.

- *Moral Discernment in the Churches*: The working groups engaged in the study on Moral Discernment in the Churches (MDC). Using the case study methodology, this project seeks to facilitate a deeper understanding of our common commitments and core values as followers of Christ, even as we recognize and address particular moral issues over

which diverse communities of faithful Christians hold principled disagreements. Four case studies were prepared by different scholars with expertise in the particular cases under examination: globalization and the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches, homosexuality and the Churches of Anglican Communion, proselytism of the Post-Soviet countries, and the stem cell research debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Germany.

Each group received one case study and was given the task of engaging in analysis of the disagreement, rather than commenting on, or resolving, the particular issue itself. In so doing each group attempted to identify the nature and causes of disagreement in moral decision-making, and to help build a foundation for continuing theological dialogue across lines of difference. These findings will serve the final goal of the MDC study, which is to provide concrete resources to help communities negotiate principled disagreement over moral issues, to undertake moral decision-making together, and to arrive at a common moral discernment.

Summary remarks

A little more than 80% of the participants were new to the Faith and Order Commission, including the Director of Faith and Order. The average age was around 47 years old. The younger plenary members, and invited younger theologians, were integrated into the working groups, and were represented amongst the plenary speakers; a number of younger theologians have agreed to contribute to an issue of the *Ecumenical Review*. While the number of women was less than 50%, women played central roles in the conference. A meeting of the 45 members, guests and consultants who are engaged in active teaching in universities, colleges and seminaries around the world gave rise to the “Academic Circle of Faith and Order”, with the intent of furthering and enabling the work of Faith and Order in academic settings globally. More than half of these academics were under 45, and half were women. The group photograph says vast things about theological ecumenism today: there are women and men, ordained and lay, diversity of age, diversity of traditions, diversity of region, diversity of ecumenical experience, and diversity of language. This is all very hopeful.

There was a sense of the global character of this Plenary Commission, reflected in the worship, speakers, plenary discussions, and working groups. The place of contextualization in the work of Faith and Order was stressed at several points.

The renewed relationship between Faith and Order and the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism was evident. A member of CWME was

present as a guest, and the Moderator of CWME, Metropolitan Dr Geevarghese Mar Coorilos, was a speaker; CWME staff members were present as well.

The Orthodox context shaped the meeting considerably, including the meetings with the local church leaders and faithful, and especially the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch. The presence of younger theologians from Crete, Greece, and Cyprus was an important contribution, as well as academic staff from the faculties of theology from the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, the University of Athens, and the Higher Ecclesiastical School of Crete. Seven plenary presentations were given by Orthodox speakers. The hospitality of our Orthodox hosts was of significant ecumenical importance.

A significant factor in the success of the meeting was the site itself, the Orthodox Academy of Crete (OAC), with its staff. The beauty of the OAC, Crete, and (mercifully) the weather were important factors.

Taking into account the 120 plenary members (or proxies), guests, consultants, Faith and Order staff, co-opted WCC Program Unit 2 (P2) and other WCC staff, WCC Communications staff and co-opted writers, more than 200 people were present at the Plenary Commission meeting, making it the largest WCC event of 2009.

Lastly, in their Plenary Commission Report, the members of the Plenary Commission appealed to the fellowship of the churches of the WCC for more visibility for the work of the Faith and Order Commission, as integral to the WCC's very foundation and future. Recognizing the necessity of a common statement on ecclesiology for the future of the ecumenical movement, the churches were again invited to respond to both *The Nature and Mission of the Church* and "Called to Be the One Church."

Words of thanks

At the conclusion of the Plenary Commission meeting, words of thanks were proffered to the leadership of the Commission; to our Moderator Metropolitan Vasilios, to the Moderator of the Plenary Planning Committee, Metropolitan Gennadios and to its members, who had worked hard for many years. Thanks were proffered to our gracious hosts, the director and staff of the Orthodox Academy of Crete. And thanks were given to the Geneva-based Secretariat of Faith and Order.

I conclude with thanks for all those who recorded for posterity the events of Plenary Commission meeting. Thanks go first to the two recording secretaries, who worked tirelessly before and after the meeting to produce its minutes: the Venerable Bruce Meyers and Ms Eden Grace. Our thanks are extended to the WCC Communications staff who translated documents, conducted interviews, reported widely on the progress of the meeting, and to

Michael West, who brought this report to print. I thank my present colleagues in the Faith and Order Secretariat, Dagmar Heller, Tamara Grdzeldze, Odair Pedroso Mateus, and Katerina Pekridou for their particular assistance in the preparation of this text. A particular word of thanks to Alexander Freeman for his indispensable help in the final preparation of this text.

And finally, I must express a huge debt of gratitude to our past colleague and former director, Thomas Best, for once again bringing his skills as an editor to bear on the final stages of editing this report of a Faith and Order Plenary Commission, and for his continuing care of a Commission and its staff that he has served so faithfully.

*Canon John Gibaut,
Director of the Commission on Faith and Order*