

Transcript of Samuel Kobia's interview about being WCC general secretary

If I were to say what is the best memory, I would like to remember my visit to Rwanda. It was in 2004. Rwanda was commemorating ten years of the genocide, but what really struck me was the capacity of ordinary people, and especially Christians, to forgive. For me, a people who had gone through what Rwandans went through in 1994, and could still say "we are ready to forgive, because there is still life after genocide", I think to me this was so inspirational. And I think it showed the best of the human spirit – the capacity to forgive, but obviously not to forget what happened.

I think what I would consider as not so good a memory was in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank in Palestine. Here was this man with his horse. I found him at a gate that was manned by the Israeli soldiers, and the man told us the story that it had taken him more than two hours to go around from the place where it would have only taken him five minutes, to cross over and go to his farm. He had to go round because he was time-barred by the time he arrived at that gate. What he told me, that really touched me personally and reminded me of my childhood days in Kenya during the colonial period, [was that] because of the conditions under which Palestinians lived in the Occupied Territories, he had to agree with his wife and his son that they couldn't live together anymore, because he could never be able to be a breadwinner for them. He was telling this in a way that obviously you could tell the agony with which he was telling this story. It reminded me of a time when as Kenyans we couldn't grow coffee because Africans were not allowed to grow coffee – it was a cash crop. It reminded of a time when my father, who had gone to look for work, was never able to come home for more than eight years because of the emergency period declared by the British colonial government in Kenya. So it resonated so much with my own experience, and yet I could see another situation, where still people are living how my people used to live 40 years ago.

I would consider one of the main areas of progress in the ecumenical movement worldwide in the last four or five years was actually the inauguration of the Global Christian Forum in November 2007. We had, I would say, the broadest platform of Christian churches, of Christian leaders from around the world, who had come together to inaugurate the Global Christian Forum. Through this forum we interact

as members of the WCC with non-members – the Roman Catholic Church, the Pentecostals, the World Evangelical Alliance – and here we are celebrating together what it is that the Holy Spirit gives to the churches. I think to me this is a huge achievement. It is a big progress that we have made. Of course, this is quite different from what we call the visible unity of the church that we seek, but at least it is a huge progress on the way to visible unity.

One of the biggest challenges that I see the ecumenical movement facing today is the decline in the commitment to unity. Many of our member churches are so preoccupied with challenges that they are facing as national churches, where those who have traditionally belonged to the mainstream Protestant churches, like Methodist or Presbyterian and even Anglican churches for that matter, who are now being more attracted towards the non-denominational congregations. When churches are facing this kind of challenge locally, or nationally, then their involvement in the search for unity becomes less. Without the full participation and commitment, deep commitment, of the member churches of WCC to searching for unity, then the ecumenical movement is hugely challenged here.

Related to that is the decline in the ways of ecumenical formation. That is why [I was so happy] whenever I had a chance of encountering young people – which has happened on a number of occasions here in the ecumenical centre – who I think are very much open to ways of working together, who are more open than the older generation to overcome the doctrinal differences that they might have.

In twenty years from now I would be very happy – I don't know whether I will be there or not, but that doesn't matter! – one of the things that I hope we will be able to achieve even before 20 years is over is celebrating a common date of Easter. I think this is something that is achievable, and this will be a very clear, practical step towards visible unity. But secondly, I hope that in 20 years' time, we will be able to celebrate the Eucharist together – all the Christian traditions and confessions. This is my prayer, this is my hope, and I really would very earnestly pray that the churches will work towards that direction.

It is very difficult really to talk of regrets, other than to say that I wish I had more time, not only for the young people that I have mentioned, but also for the churches. I respond perhaps to only a quarter of the invitations that I get, either to

visit the churches in their celebrations of major events, or simply pastoral visits to the churches, or solidarity visits to situations where people are going through difficulties. The regret I would have is that I didn't have enough time.

For me, as an African growing [up] in a rural situation in the central part of Kenya, going through an education process that had so many difficulties, it's sometimes by chance that we were able even to complete elementary school, leave alone high school, college, university etc. For me then to have found myself being elected general secretary of the World Council of Churches, obviously the highest position one can get within the ecumenical movement, was, I would say, unimaginable to start with, but it was also the most humbling experience that I had. It was an opportunity to bring the best from the African tradition, African culture, to bring the best from my confessional background as a Methodist minister, and to bring the best as an individual, with whatever gifts that God has given me ... to bring this into this ministry for me has been the greatest privilege an individual could ever have. I would say the relational dimension is what sustains me – when it comes to the relationship with my staff, the relationship with the governance of the World Council of Churches, the relationship with the partners that we have. To me, all this is what has sustained me. So this relational dimension is really what has helped and carried me. And I brought this as part of my being African, because we put very, very strong accent on relation. You are because you relate, and because you relate, therefore you are.