

World Council of Churches

Report of the Meeting of the Plenary Commission on Faith and Order  
Crete, Greece  
07-14 October 2009

“That they may be one in God’s hand:  
Called to be the One Church”

**Glory to God, whose power working in us  
can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.  
Glory to God from generation to generation,  
in the church and in Christ Jesus,  
forever and ever. Amen**

I

1. In the spirit of the 2006 WCC Assembly’s statement on ecclesiology, “Called to be the One Church”, we, the 120 members of the Commission on Faith and Order, with thirty-seven guests, consultants and younger theologians gathered on the island of Crete in Greece. We received the most gracious hospitality of the Orthodox Academy of Crete, whose president is His Eminence Metropolitan Amphilochios of Kissamos and Selinon. His Eminence Metropolitan Damaskenos of Chania also welcomed and hosted the Commission on various occasions.

2. On behalf of the churches we represent we celebrated our common life in Christ, and we laboured to draw closer to the unity that is God’s gift. Our work took place in the context of daily prayer and Bible study. We carried out our work in plenary sessions, as well as in working groups. We gathered in confessional and regional caucuses during which particular concerns and contexts were shared. We met the bishops, clergy and faithful of the local Orthodox dioceses, parishes and monastic communities.

3. His All Holiness, Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch, graced the first evening session of the Plenary Commission with his presence and with an opening address. He welcomed the Commission to the Orthodox Academy, of which he is patron, and gave his blessing to our Faith and Order work here in Crete. His address developed the commission theme in terms of “Unity as Calling, Conversion and Mission”. His Eminence Archbishop Ireneos of Crete also blessed us in the opening prayer.

II

4. In his report, His Eminence Metropolitan Dr Vasilios of Constantia-Ammochostos (Church of Cyprus), moderator of the Commission, reflected on the contributions of Faith and Order and its goal of unity. He raised two fundamental questions: how do Churches today perceive and define the nature of church unity? and for which unity do we speak, and for whom, when a significant number of Christians reject the ecumenical movement as a whole? The Moderator also spoke of the importance of the Commission on Faith and Order finding more visibility within the World Council of Churches.

5. The Rev. Canon Dr John Gibaut (Anglican Church of Canada), director of Faith and Order, began his presentation by comparing those engaged in Faith and Order work to climatologists rather than to meteorologists. A meteorologist, he said, “thinks of the weather in terms of days, while a climatologist thinks of weather in terms of decades”. The work for Christian unity by means of theological dialogue can be comprehended only within the context of decades. Canon Gibaut also emphasized the role of the Plenary Commission as Faith and Order’s forum for theological debate and a basis of membership for participation in study groups and consultations.

6. A current president of the WCC and a former moderator of Faith and Order, Dame Mary Tanner (Church of England) gave a paper entitled “A view from the past”. Tracing Faith and Order since Edinburgh 1910, she reminded us that it is by the grace of God and by the wind of the Spirit blowing in the Faith and Order sails that the movement has journeyed as far as Crete 2009. Naming many of our ecumenical forebears, she invited us to cultivate Faith and Order relationships and to make room for new generations. Reflecting on the next stages of the ecumenical movement, Dame Mary wondered whether we may too easily have passed from a comparative method of conversation to the convergence/consensus method, too easily bypassing the rigour of really getting to know one another in listening for the gifts the others have to offer us, and by explaining the gifts we think our tradition has to offer them. She then posed two questions to us: how faithful have we been in holding before our churches the goal of visible unity, so richly understood as a *koinonia* whose origins are found in the very life of the Triune God? and, where do we go from here? She answered by calling us to fidelity to Faith and Order’s mandate, to believe in the churches’ reconciling mission in a broken world, and to say to one another, “I have need of you”.

### III

7. The Plenary Commission’s theme, “Called to Be the One Church”, was first explicitly addressed by five participants. Dr Minna Hietamäki (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland) spoke on the challenge and opportunity of unity and diversity in *koinonia*. In the aftermath of apartheid, the Rev. Professor Maake Masango (Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa) drew our attention to the South African understanding of visible unity as organic unity. The Rev. Dr Marianela De la Paz Cot (Episcopal Church in Cuba), looked at the unity of the church in relation to its inclusivity, opening spaces for dialogue and cooperation across the religions in Cuba, where culture is key as an “access code” to dialogue. Sister Professor Maria Ko Ha Fong (Roman Catholic Church) spoke of the necessity of a kingdom-centred ecclesiology and a vision of Christian unity in the Asian context where Christians are a minority. His Eminence Metropolitan Professor Dr Gennadios of Sassima (Ecumenical Patriarchate) said that “called to be the one church” presents to us two callings or calls: the first one is imperative to all of us, affirming our faith and belief to the One who constitutes the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The second call, coming from the Church as *ekklesia*, is an authentic prerogative confirming that we are all members of this One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and in responding we confirm our belonging to our Lord Jesus Christ.

8. The study on *The Nature and Mission of the Church* was discussed in plenary and in working groups. There were three plenary presentations. A consultant to the Commission, the Rev. Dr Paul Collins (Church of England) from Ecclesiological Investigations, presenting his paper, “Cognitive and Aesthetic Approaches to Theology and *The Nature and Mission of the Church*”, addressed the objective and the experiential character of this document. The vice-moderator of the Commission, the Rev Dr Hermen Shastri (Methodist Church in Malaysia) described the process of receiving the responses to the document and the role of the plenary commissioners in that process. A co-moderator of the Ecclesiology Working Group, the Very Rev. Professor Dr.

Viorel Ionita (Romanian Orthodox Church) stressed the importance of holding together *The Nature and Mission of the Church* with the Porto Alegre assembly statement, *Called to Be the One Church*. Further perspectives were offered by a panel comprising of the Rev. Prof. Emmanuel Anya Anyambod (Presbyterian Church in Cameroon); Fr Jorge Alejandro Scampini O.P. from Argentina (Roman Catholic Church); the Rev. Dr. Otele Perelini (Congregational Christian Church of Samoa) His Grace Metropolitan Geevarghese Coorilos from India (Syrian Orthodox Church), moderator of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC. These presentations accented the import of contextualization in Faith and Order work.

9. Working groups provided data for three aspects of the *NMC* study: a critical evaluation of the document, an update on the responses to the document thus far received and a review of the process leading towards the next stages of the document. In working groups we engaged in dialogue on three sets of question areas about: individual and group reception of the document; suggestions concerning the next steps to take in the ecclesiology study; and how the ecclesiological work of Faith and Order may be received in the churches. In a plenary session each of the groups presented a report of its findings on *The Nature and Mission of the Church* to the Plenary Commission.

10. The study on Tradition and traditions was also discussed in plenary and in working groups. In plenary a review was given on the 2008 Cambridge consultation which launched the study on sources of authority. The Rev. Dr Susan Durber (United Reformed Church) presented a paper on “Tradition and traditions: The teachers and witnesses of the early Church: a common source of authority, variously received?” The Very Rev. Dr Cyril Hovorun (Russian Orthodox Church, Ukraine) presented a paper entitled “Teachers and Witnesses of the Church: space for ecumenical convergence”, speaking specifically to the Cambridge report. This was followed by a reflection on the consultation and an introduction to sources, as background for further study in working groups. Dr R. M. Keelan Downton (National Community Church, USA) challenged us to consider the viability of an “open source” approach to tradition. The Very Rev. Dr. Elpidophoros Lambriniadis (Ecumenical Patriarchate) introduced the three early church fathers whose texts would be studied in working groups: Ambrose of Milan, Gregory the Theologian and Isaac of Ninevah. The Rev. Ofelia Alvarez Coleman (Moravian Church in Nicaragua) reacted to the Cambridge consultation from the Latin American perspective.

11. The task in working groups was then twofold: to address questions raised thus far concerning what authority the sources of the early church hold in our churches today and which primary issues ought to be considered for a follow-up consultation in 2011. Concerning the first task, working groups were given an excerpt from Ambrose of Milan (4<sup>th</sup> century CE), Gregory the Theologian (4<sup>th</sup> century CE) or Isaac of Ninevah (7<sup>th</sup> century CE). Group members reflected on how the particular patristic text might be received as a source of authority, in their churches in general and in their local ecclesial context in particular. Regarding the second task, working groups proposed possible angles from which a second consultation might advance the Cambridge findings. Questions answered by group members concerned aspects of authority such as acknowledgement of sources, appeal to sources and the role sources of authority play in shaping ecclesial identity.

12. The working groups engaged in the study on Moral Discernment in the Churches. Using a 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 the 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 to engage in analysis of the disagreement, rather than to comment on, or resolve, any particular issue. 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.

#### IV. A Message of Encouragement to the Churches

13. Paul was driven by the winds of Holy Spirit to Crete on his way to Rome, and desired to stay longer still (Acts 27:4-13). Like Paul and his companions, we too found in this idyllic setting a fair haven, nurtured by Greek hospitality and Orthodox spirituality. May the same Spirit refresh all Christians on their ecumenical journey towards that unity for which Christ prayed. After our week together, we recommit ourselves and our churches to the historic yet ever fresh mandate of Faith and Order, “to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe.” We have lived this vision, touched its power in the Holy Spirit, and we commend it to all the churches, many of whose members live in contexts of war, poverty, sickness and injustice. Our work towards the unity of the Church is integrally linked to the Christian witness to justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

14. To the fellowship of the churches linked through the World Council of Churches, we appeal for more visibility for the work of the Faith and Order Commission, as integral to the Council’s very foundation and future. Recognizing the necessity of a common statement on ecclesiology for the future of the ecumenical movement, we invite the churches to make their responses to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* and “Called to be the One Church.” The quest for the unity of the Church is inseparable from the unity of the human family. The visible unity of the Church is an imperative for its nature and mission; it is “called together with all people of good will to care for the integrity of creation in addressing the abuse and destruction of God’s creation, and to participate in God’s healing of broken relationships between creation and humanity” (*The Nature and Mission of the Church* I.B.40, page 26).

15. Our report closes with the words to us from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew:

“Beloved brothers and sisters, the unity that we seek is a gift from above, which we must pursue persistently as well as patiently; it is not something that depends solely on us, but primarily on God’s judgment and *kairos*. Nevertheless, this sacred gift of unity is something that also demands something of us: radical conversion and reorientation so that we may turn humbly toward our common roots in the Apostolic Church and the communion of saints, but also so that we may entrust ourselves and submit to God’s heavenly kingdom and authority. Finally, however, unity obliges us to a common purpose in this age as we expect the age to come; for it commits us to a sacred ministry and mission in realizing that kingdom, as we declare in the Lord’s prayer, ‘on earth as it is in heaven’. Such is the sacred gift that we have inherited. This, too, is the sacred task that lies before us. ‘Let us go forth in peace to proclaim the good news to the world’” (from the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom).