

Going the Second Mile

*A message of the 8th consultation of United and Uniting Churches
Johannesburg, 29 October – 5 November 2008*

As representatives of United and Uniting Churches, we gathered together to reflect on our particular vocation in this time and context, and to consider how God's mission calls us forward. The way we have been responding to the central mandate of the ecumenical movement, namely its call to visible unity, may no longer be sufficient. As the theme, *Going the Second Mile*, suggests, a changing landscape asks for new approaches and a renewed commitment to unity, which may also produce new insights into the nature and mission of our churches. While we thank God and rejoice in the fruits of our ecumenical ventures, we cannot do so without being aware of this enterprise as a continuing process, including the possibility that solutions can become questions again.

From 25 United and Uniting Churches from 20 countries and all continents, we convened at the Cedar Park Convention Centre near Johannesburg, South Africa, together with observers from the Roman Catholic Church and the Organisation of African Instituted Churches. Invited by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, we shared experiences and explored options for our future role within God's mission in reconciling the world to God's self.

Presenters were invited to offer papers on five themes: identity, episcopate, unity & mission, non-traditional perspectives, and criteria for unity/limits of diversity. The conference was hosted by the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa and the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. Opportunities to visit the Apartheid Museum in Soweto and local congregations gave vital context to our reflections. Guest speakers from South Africa provided important input at the beginning of our conference. Prof. Tinyiko Maluleke (Unisa, Pretoria), Prof. Russel Botman and Prof. Dirk Smit (both University of Stellenbosch) shared with us their profound comments on our theme, from their perspectives of recent experiences of churches in Southern Africa.

In his presentation, Prof. Dirk Smit referred to the structure of the *Belhar Confession* that emphasized the indissoluble ties between unity, reconciliation and justice. Unity is never an aim by itself. This insight had a great impact on the reflections of this consultation.

In a time of intensifying globalisation we are acutely aware of the contextual character of each attempt at church unity. Political, social and cultural factors have played a role – and continue to do so – in the still ongoing history of divisions and of uniting processes within Christianity. Often doctrinal issues have been and are being given as exclusively decisive. This can mask the fact that sometimes theological reasoning can be co-opted to serve secular interests. We are more and more conscious that so-called non-theological issues like size, finances, nationality, cultural identity, and other historical and sociological factors, can become either driving forces or stumbling blocks whenever churches try to achieve visible unity. If these issues become the predominant orientation we must recognise their ambivalent impact, because they can be helpful but can also veil the clarity of the purpose. Non-theological issues can have theological implications and *vice versa*. Like doctrinal decisions, non-theological issues need theological assessment. Given the complexity of these questions, do we have to reconsider our criteria for unity?

We confess that the unity of the universal Church is rooted in the triune God, and is a matter of faith. Unity as a human effort is a response to the unity given in God. Living out of the reconciliation in Christ offered to all, United and Uniting Churches are seeking visible forms of unity. For some, unity is based on a new common confession (organic unity); for others, unity seeks to preserve the distinctiveness of the respective confessional traditions, and

these distinctions are welcomed as mutually enriching (reconciled diversity), not seen as a division of the body of Christ.

Unity can only be given a valid visible form when the wider need for reconciliation in specific contexts is taken into account. Unity and reconciliation can only flourish if the liberating message of justification and its implemented understanding of God's justice incites us to pursue human justice.

More than ever we need to stress the relationship among the various aspects of the church's unity and mission. Inclusiveness, although sometimes costly, is essential for a credible witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

United and Uniting Churches do not claim to be forerunners within the ecumenical movement, nor do we see ourselves as relics of an ecumenical past. We do not choose to organise ourselves as another Christian World Communion. We do confirm and renew our commitment to travelling the road to more visible unity. We recognize that our churches will need to maintain an identity-in-process, in which what has been experienced as defining does not exclude the openness to new insights from sometimes unexpected places. Newcomers, migrants, outside voices can offer fresh perspectives. We know that dynamics of arrogance, inertia and error often play a role in ecclesial life. We intend to keep looking for fresh ways of mutual encouragement and support, in the midst of the complexities of life in the early 21st century.

In imagining our journey into the future we identified different categories of issues.

- Some ecclesiological issues have been part of the ecumenical agenda for decades, like the role of episcopate and episcopacy in unification processes, the partly new questions regarding baptism practices, and the significance of confessional documents in bringing and keeping churches together. They will continue to engage us, albeit from new perspectives.
- Some theological issues are related to rather new challenges that have only played a minor role so far. In many contexts the so-called mainline churches are confronted with fast growing Christian communities that seem to better draw upon experiences and expectations of the people, especially of the youth. New forms of responding to cultural changes have to be explored, not only in the South, but also in the North, where churches have to some extent lost contact with modern and post-modern lifestyles. Do we not sometimes tend to stress the autonomy of congregations at the expense of conciliar decision making?
- Particular questions are linked with the phenomenon of globalisation. Modern means of information and communication provide new options for our communities. Direct contacts between Christians from different cultural backgrounds, especially through migration, imply new challenges and opportunities as well. In certain Evangelical and Pentecostal communities, a Western way of life, particularly as expressed in the so-called prosperity gospel, is sometimes seen as a Christian asset in itself. At the same time certain consequences of globalisation jeopardize peace, justice and the integrity of creation, especially in Southern continents.

We are aware of the fact that these categories can be distinguished, but can not be fully separated: all kinds of cross-references play a role here. It is our intention to share some of our questions in this respect with the Faith and Order Commission, as a reaction to its study on *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

We will continue to ask ourselves and our sisters and brothers in the ecumenical movement: 'What could keep us, in our different contexts, from going further, yet another mile on the road to full visible unity?'

China Christian Council
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Church of Christ in Thailand
Church of North India
Church of South India
Church of the Living God (African Instituted Church)
Evangelical Church in the Rhineland
Evangelical Church of the River Plate
Evangelical Church of Westfalia
Evangelical Lutheran Church in France
Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau
Protestant Church in the Netherlands
Reformed Church of France
Roman Catholic Church
Union of Evangelical Churches in the Evangelical Church in Germany
United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands
United Church of Canada
United Church of Christ in Japan
United Church of Christ in the Philippines
United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe
United Church of Christ USA
United Church of Zambia
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa
United Protestant Church in Belgium
United Reformed Church, UK
Uniting Church in Australia
Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa
Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa