

## **Ecumenical Conversations**

### **Introduction**

Ecumenical conversations provide a space for delegates to share their experiences in addressing key concerns for the future of the churches and their common witness and action. How do the churches respond, individually and ecumenically, to the diverse and rapidly changing realities of the world? What are the main concerns today that require action by the churches together because they challenge the very being of the church, tear people apart and set them against each other, but also because they urge the churches to be faithful to the call to become and to be one in Christ so that the world may believe (John 17:21)? What are the issues that are of vital importance for children and youth because they are crucial for their own future and for the lives of generations to come?

All who participate are invited to share their concerns and insights, being fully responsible both to their churches and people at home and to the common calling in Christ. In dialogue, the ecumenical conversations will become an exciting opportunity for addressing together the prevailing dynamics and trends of today's world and discerning the signs of the times in the light of faith.

### **Called to be co-workers with God**

At the heart of Christian faith lies the affirmation of God's presence in this world: God assuming in Christ's incarnation the whole of the created order, visible and invisible, heaven and earth, for the healing, reconciliation, transformation and transfiguration of the entire cosmos. Christ became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). In him and through him all were created, and in him all are to be gathered in unity, reconciled, transformed, transfigured and saved (Col. 1:15-23): a new humanity and a new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:1).

The world is God's creation, and it belongs to God. Humanity has the mark of God's image and is called to grow into God's likeness (Gen. 1:26). The whole of creation is filled with and sustained by God's Spirit (Ps. 104:29-30). The whole world is filled with God's grace. In Christ, through the incarnation, we have all received "from God's full store grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

By God's grace the whole of creation is sustained, transformed, transfigured and brought into unity. By grace, God has the initiative in all things. However, the new humanity in Christ, renewed, regenerated and transformed by God's grace, is commissioned to take part in God's healing and transformation of the world (1 Cor. 3:9). By God's grace, the world is being called to transformation, healing and reconciliation, but the ministry of proclamation remains our responsibility (Col. 1:23). The *martyria*, *leitourgia*, *koinonia* and *diakonia* of the church become, therefore, synergic acts by which Christians, with full accord and commitment, implement in mission, prayer and action the work of God's grace in their lives for the transformation of the world.

For such theological reasons, the theme of the assembly is in the form of a prayer. We are persuaded to give up any arrogant expectations based on the premise that with our force and skills alone the world can be changed and transformed. The grace of God is given freely, salvation is offered to the whole of humanity and creation, but it is not imposed upon us, for the mystery of human freedom is also a gift from God. The good news of God's grace thus exposes the depth of human sin that still distorts the image of God in the other human being and exploits God's creation without mercy or limits. There is no doubt that also many Christians fail to respond to God's grace as the liberated children of God (Rom. 8:21; Cor. 7:23).

Therefore, the theme of the assembly is an invitation to reflection, metanoia and transformation. We are first called to recognize and affirm God's initiative and work in all, and to pray in support of it. At the same time, we are urged to a personal response to God's



initiative and to act according to our new humanity renewed by grace, as fellow citizens with Christ and co-workers with God (Eph. 2:19).

The assembly theme is an invitation to look at the world as a place loved by God and permeated by God's grace. Seen through the eyes of faith, this world can and must be transformed: from unjust to more just relationships, from environmental destruction to care for creation, from a world marked by the deadly consequences of sin to a world open to receive life out of the hands of God. It is a miracle that happens again and again when people in the midst of severe threats to their lives celebrate in worship the presence and power of God's grace. With them we pray: "God, in your grace, transform the world."

"Another world is possible" was the motto of those who gathered in Porto Alegre for the World Social Forum in resistance to neo-liberal economic globalization, and engaged in the struggle for alternatives. Christians have even more reasons to resist fatalism and to say: God created the world and will never stop caring for it (Gen. 1-2). Christ shared the suffering of a world groaning for liberation (Rom. 8) in his death on the cross. "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed" - the joy of Easter is an expression of the yearning and hope that the chains of sin and death will be broken for all human beings and all creation (Col. 1:15ff.). The creative, reconciling and healing power of the Holy Spirit continues to transform the world as the breath of God's love (agape), which is God's transforming power of grace (Rom. 8-11).

Remembering that all life is created by God and that God continues to care for it, we affirm the sacredness of all life and receive God's gift of life that we share with all other creatures and all creation. The earth is not ours, but God's common home for all who are connected within the web of life, the earth community (Ps. 24:104). It is not we who sustain life, but God. All our human power must be accountable to God. All human activities must recognize and respect the logic and rules (ecology and economy) of God's greater

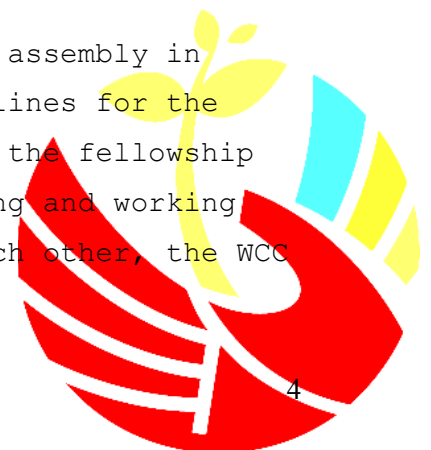
household of life (oikoumene) in just and sustainable relationships that make for peace and the flourishing of communities.

### **Discerning the signs of the times**

In trying to identify our specific tasks in the transformation of today's world, it is important to begin always from our faith convictions and to base our actions on biblical and theological grounds. Equally important, however, is understanding the context one is working in and addressing. God loved the world, though it was sinful and fallen, and through Christ in the Holy Spirit took it up, together with the consequences of sin, in order to transform and redeem it from within. Likewise, Christians today, before confronting and challenging the world and its ways, have first to understand and love it, to identify the signs of the presence of God's grace and to try building upon that foundation, by God's grace, through the work of transformation and reconciliation.

Success or failure of the ecumenical conversations will depend on a genuine and committed encounter among delegates and youth in addressing the challenges we are confronted with as people of faith. At times this may be difficult and even conflictual, but it will serve the process of spiritual discernment and a much better understanding of how differently people experience the impact of changing realities, depending on their place in a world marked by growing inequality, violence and misuse of power. Differing responses to ethical challenges such as human sexuality and the beginning and ending of human life have gravely undermined the common witness within and also among the churches. Coming together in ecumenical conversation will help the churches to see more clearly what needs to be done by churches in mutual solidarity and support at local, national, regional and international levels.

These conversations will facilitate the task of the assembly in identifying and determining the framework and guidelines for the future work of the World Council Churches (WCC). As the fellowship of churches committed to staying together, to praying and working ecumenically in making themselves accountable to each other, the WCC



will only fulfil its task if the mandate given by the assembly reflects the common concerns of the member churches and ecumenical partners, supports them in overcoming divisive issues and facilitates their common witness and action. The WCC can do well only those things that the churches are committed to do together in clear recognition of their own diversity and differences.

**The changing religious, cultural and ecclesial context: Christian identity and mission in a multicultural and multifaith world**

- In a world confronted with annihilation of identities through globalization and cultural homogenization on the one hand, and brokenness and fragmentation on the other, the mission of the church is to proclaim healing and reconciliation and to give shape to communities where the seeds of healing and reconciliation are experienced and lived.
- In the multicultural and multi religious contexts that Christians live in today, in all parts of the world, there is an urgent need for a fresh articulation of Christian identity and of the mission of the church - not separated from or against others, but in relation to them.
- For a church which defines itself as the body of Christ, as a community of men and women renewed by grace sharing equally in the life of the one and common body, there is the need to learn from the experiences of women. Their experiences bring a vision of partnership in seeking justice, a key to what it means to be church.
- What is the role and place of the disabled in the life and mission of a church which follows the biblical vision of the whole cosmos being gathered in Christ, and sees itself as a mystery and seed of that integral and holistic eschatological reality?
- In approaching anthropology today, one can no longer deal with it dualistically and avoid topics considered taboo such as sexuality, which are essential to human integrity and wholeness. Churches and Christians are divided and keep dividing on such issues. A responsible answer is expected, based on biblical and

theological foundations as well as on medical, sociological and psychological analysis and reflection.

- The new information and communication technologies (ICT) have permeated all spheres of life. Most people, and especially youth, are influenced, if not dependent on, these technologies. What is the place and role of such technologies in the overall life and mission of the church today?

The issue of transformation, healing and reconciliation is closely related to that of koinonia and ecumenical fellowship. How are these dynamics affected by, and how do they affect, the changing ecumenical approaches to ecclesiology and discipleship? Over the years, since the foundation of the WCC, the traditional meaning and goal of the ecumenical movement has been challenged, expanded, reshaped, rearticulated. The WCC document on a *Common Vision and Understanding* made an attempt to bring into a coherent presentation the various meanings and goals of oikoumene and what people of our time expect from it. The process of reflection is still going on, and the need for a clear rearticulation of a contemporary ecumenical vision is vital.

- What are the meaning and components of the search for unity in a world confronted with a culture of violence, with the quest for more sophisticated weapons of mass destruction? What does it mean to be human in an age when the power of the rich is growing, migrants face discrimination and basic ethical categories of understanding and action are being challenged?
- What new forms of ecumenism and of ecumenical cooperation will motivate and inspire people today?
  - In a time when the ecumenical institutional structures are being challenged and the need for reconfiguration is being expressed, when a grassroots post-denominational ecumenism is emerging and many are in search of more experiential faith expressions?
  - In a time when many Christians, in particular the youth, are yearning for more spiritual depth and for a more meaningful expression of faith?



- In a time when the Evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatics are developing their own interchurch structures and are becoming interested and involved in an ecumenical search for unity, cooperation and service?
- How can the fellowship of churches act together with specialized ministries and local communities and organizations in responding to human suffering and need, when traditional Christian cooperation and diakonia are being challenged by the competition for resources between different actors working in the field of human development?
- From the beginning of the ecumenical movement, the youth movement was the engine which gave life to it and kept its flame burning brightly. What could be the role of youth, including students and other laity, in transforming the ecumenical landscape today?
- What content and methodologies of ecumenical formation could fit and have impact on the people of our time?

**The changing international political, social and economic context:  
the challenge of economic globalization and empire**

Justice as the essence of the love of God motivated the prophets in their critique of the destructive impact of injustice and misuse of power on people and earth. The prophets' vision of the good life was rooted in God's preferential option for the poor that was at the heart of the stories of Israel's liberation from slavery and in the sabbath and jubilee vision of God's good creation (Ex. 21; Lev. 25; Deut. 15; Isa. 61). Jesus affirms this vision when he proclaims the jubilee year of the Lord (Luke 4) and teaches the disciples to liberate themselves from injustice, greed and fear of the future (Matt. 6:19ff.), to serve God and not mammon (Matt. 6:24), to trust in God's love and care for all life (Matt. 6:25ff.) and to "strive first for the kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33). Jesus embodies the bread and the water of life (John 6:22ff., 7:37ff.). His body and blood are broken and shed for all (Luke 22:14ff.) so that all may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Because the gospel proclaims the love of God revealed in Christ, it also points to the

depth of human sin that leads to death and destruction and affirms the need for transformative justice and care for the earth.

But what does it mean to affirm these values in the changing international and political, social and economic contexts? Economic globalization and a new geopolitical configuration have an enormous impact on peoples' lives in all the regions of the world. Very often these forces deny the urgent need to address growing inequality, poverty, wars, the threats to nature combined with the spread of diseases and the death and fragmentation of communities caused by HIV and AIDS. The fear of loss sits deep - especially among those who continue to benefit from unequally distributed economic growth and accumulation of wealth at the expense of the poor and of nature. Are there ways that the vision of life as a gift of God's grace encourages people to trust that they may well gain in quality of life when the race to concentrate wealth and power into ever fewer hands stops, so that they may begin to resist the constant drive towards economic growth and misuse of power?

- How do the churches address different dimensions and forms of power relationships impacting on peoples' lives and livelihoods at the local level, but also at national and international levels, e.g. international military alliances, the United Nations' system, the international financial institutions or the World Trade Organization?
- What does it require to speak truth to power in a context in which political, military, economic, social, cultural and religious forms of power are increasingly linked with each other in support of hegemonic, imperial power?
- How can peoples' lives and their dignity be protected from the impact of growing violence? What are the new threats to peace that even further undermine the security and future life of communities?
- Will the churches be able to build hospitable communities in such a violent and competitive environment where life is systematically devalued?





- What is the proper role of religion in politics and public life? What are the many dangers to which religion may fall prey in politics, and how may religion be manipulated and abused to counteract and paralyze the proper critique of the churches?
- Despite all promises of those still defending the prevailing economic paradigm, the scandal of poverty and growing economic inequality is a deadly reality for millions and even billions of people, children, women, men - sisters and brothers. How can the churches strengthen their prophetic voice in the quest for just economic and political structures and institutional frameworks, and improve the impact of their ecumenical cooperation?
- This question is closely related to the roles of science and technology that challenge the churches' witness to the sanctity of life.
- It also points to the vital importance of the earth's resources we are called to care for and not to plunder. What is the role of Indigenous peoples, of women and marginal groups in all of this?
- How do racism, casteism and other forms of discrimination justify and further aggravate injustice and inequality?
- How are children and women affected and what are the many forms in which they bear the brunt of the problems and become victims of violence?

In the centre of all of this are questions of power and structural injustice that need to be understood and addressed.

### **Renewing our commitment**

As we reflect together in ecumenical conversations during the assembly on the common challenges facing the churches today, the expectation is that from sharing different experiences and actions, joys, frustrations, achievements and failures, Christians from different parts of the world will learn from one another and will strengthen their fellowship and commitment to stay and act together for the renewal and transformation of the churches and of the world. The future mandate that will emerge out of the assembly will be vital and coherent only if it grows out of a renewed commitment of the churches to their ecumenical calling. While we pray "God, in

your grace, transform the world”, we also join in the prayer of Jesus Christ “that all may be one” (John 17:20).

