

## **Changing Religious and Cultural Context**

### **1. Mission as healing and reconciling communities**

In a time of globalization, violence, ideological polarization, fragmentation and exclusion, what is the importance of Christian mission? This ecumenical conversation will offer the opportunity to reflect on the message of the gospel and methods of mission in such a context.

Saint Paul speaks of the new creation heralded by Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit. "In Christ", Paul says, "God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting his trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:19-20). It is this "new creation", by God's transforming grace, that we hold to be the goal of God's own mission.

Reconciliation, as the restoration of right relations with God in Christ, is the source of reconciliation with oneself, with other people and with the whole of creation. As Christians we are called to receive and celebrate this gift and, empowered by the Spirit, to involve the church in relevant forms of mission and proclamation that point to Christ's vision of fullness of life for all.

As ambassadors of this message and partners in God's mission, the church is called to reach out to individuals, families, communities, churches and nations bearing witness to the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the world as a living sign of God's new creation. We are called to be agents of healing and reconciliation in the midst of illness and disease, conflict and tension, crisis and suffering. But we also are called in the midst of the search for meaning and community where "private" forms of spirituality or religiosity seem most attractive and where churches are losing clergy and members.

The road to reconciliation and healing is not an easy one. It involves listening, truth telling, repentance, forgiveness and a sincere commitment to Christ and his justice. It includes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing. It involves healing in the midst of

struggles for social, economic and ecological justice. It involves reconciling communities and churches in conflict. It involves nurturing congregations seeking renewal. It involves proclaiming and testifying to the gospel of transforming grace where people are desperately looking for spiritual meaning. It lives in the tension of the coming of God's reign as "already here" and "yet to come", but with the assurance that all true healing comes from God.

Within our many traditions, we share rich resources of experience, testimonies and gifts to strengthen our common witness to the Risen Lord. These include healing through prayer, ascetical practices and charisms; sacraments and liturgies; medical and spiritual ministries; social and systemic approaches - all sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

This ecumenical conversation will provide a space for theological reflection and sharing on the healing and reconciling mission of the church.

The **first session** will provide an opportunity to understand the varied contexts in which we live and witness to the gospel. It will include a presentation on fostering healing and reconciling communities.

The **second session** will be a sharing of experiences, both negative and positive, in ministries of healing and reconciliation as they relate to the mission of the church and the call to proclaim the gospel.

The **third session** will explore how, as fellowship of churches and a family with many traditions, we can work together as partners in God's healing and reconciling mission and how this can be a source of strength in our search for visible unity.

## **2. Religious plurality is embraced and feared**

We live in a world where forces of cultural homogenization are at work. At the same time, communities and individuals alike often manifest the search for distinctiveness. In some cases, religious and cultural differences are blurred or even ignored. In other cases, they are exaggerated.

Religious plurality poses an unprecedented challenge to Christians in most parts of the world. It is embraced or feared. It is also embraced and feared. In many ways, better relations with neighbours of other religions are sought. Yet relations between religious communities are marked, in many places, by suspicion or hostility.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2). As Christians, we oscillate between an openness to encounter God through others and our affirmation that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

In the light of recent developments in inter-religious relations and the ways in which they are perceived, Christians are addressing afresh, theologically and otherwise, the question raised by religious plurality and its implication for the life and witness of the church.

Many concrete initiatives are taken in inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. Such initiatives, and the theological reflections that sustain them, invite an ecumenical conversation. Churches, in the diversity of their situations, can learn from each other’s experience and agree on what they are called to do together.

What are the fears that hinder our commitment to inter-religious dialogue and cooperation? What are the reasons others might be fearful of us? How do we engage in dialogue while being true to our beliefs and respectful of the faith of others? What are the challenges we face once dialogue and cooperation are established? How does a fellowship of churches address these issues together?

The **first session** will assess the present state of inter-religious relations on a global level and the way they influence, and are influenced by, local realities in many parts of the world.

The **second session** will be a sharing of how Christians are addressing, in their local context, the changing inter-religious context in which they

live. It will be an opportunity to learn from the diversity of theological insights and concrete experiences.

The **third session** will focus on the common responsibility of churches in fellowship and the various possibilities of increased cooperation between them in the area of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation.

### **3. Becoming a community of women and men: learning from women's ways of being church**

The biblical story of creation offers a theological basis for the church as a community of women and men - created together in the likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). This is not an abstract understanding of humanity; rather, it affirms the dignity and value of all human beings - female and male.

It is a struggle to live into this Genesis vision. We face many theological challenges in the search for an authentic expression of the church as a community of women and men engaged together in the life of the church and society.

The challenges include deepening our understanding of the authority of scripture in light of our experience; of models of mission and service that strengthen the ministry of the full community; and of the language and symbols used in worship and how they impact relations between women and men.

While women have been faithful to the church, this is often trivialized or marginalized in terms of women's leadership as well as their theological and spiritual contributions. In many contexts the church is slow to speak about this injustice and as a result the ministry of the church suffers.

Women have unique perspectives on "being church" characterized by a vision of the church as a community of women and men - a vision of partnership seeking justice. This is a vision of the church in which solidarity, accountability, compassion and an ethic of care are foundational. Participation and a genuine sharing of power are central to this vision. Maintaining a critical perspective and visioning anew the

history, theology and doctrine of the church has been fundamental to shaping this vision.

Through their faithful engagement in the ecumenical movement and contributions to the search for visible unity women have affirmed the plurality of their experiences, the integrity of their ecclesial traditions and a holistic commitment to ministry. They have underlined the need to respect and honour diverse understandings of liberation and freedom.

Each generation of ecumenically committed women has articulated its perspective on the renewal of the church in its time. This ecumenical conversation, which is open to women and men, will provide a space to listen to the experiences of women and to reflect on what it means to be a community of women and men transforming the world.

The **first session** will review the present context through a sharing of stories, hopes and struggles that address some of the visions women have to offer the church. It will include a theological reflection on the church as a community of women and men.

The **second session** will reflect on how churches express their solidarity with women. It will allow churches to share stories of commitment to strengthen the role of women in the church and to address the challenges that women face in serving the church.

The **third session** will listen to women's visions and ways of "being church". It will identify some of the challenges facing the ecumenical movement in encouraging churches to become authentic communities of women and men participating in the transformation of the church and the world.

#### **4. Human sexuality: body and soul; world and church**

A group of 150 church leaders from around the world recently gathered to discuss, among other things, human sexuality. Though the churches represented at this meeting of the WCC central committee had differing "entry-points" and positions on the way they perceive and respond to issues of human sexuality, the discussion was characterized by a spirit

of understanding and sensitivity, empowered by grace, as the leaders attentively listened to one another. It is possible for churches to talk about human sexuality!

The rapidly changing cultural and religious context in which we live has challenged churches to reflect on specific issues, concerns and fears related to the often sensitive and sometimes taboo topic of human sexuality. In most contexts a generations old dialogue between gospel and culture has crafted a specific understanding of "morality" that influences how churches address issues related to human sexuality.

However, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS has challenged many churches to discuss openly human sexuality in life-giving and healing ways. Clergy around the world are called upon daily to respond to a range of interpersonal concerns including chastity (pre-marital sex), marriage, family life, fidelity (extra-marital relations), contraception and abortion. In many places the church has responded with theological courage to community concerns such as the sexuality of persons with disabilities, women's sexuality and the desire of gay and lesbian Christians to contribute to the life of the church.

Churches around the world have responded to the issue as sometimes liberating and as sometimes threatening - each with its own "entry-point". Several churches have issued statements on human sexuality after careful study and consultation accompanied by prayer. And yet the biblical, theological and ethical challenges presented by these issues have sometimes caused painful divisions within the church locally, nationally and even confessionally.

Can it be said that we face a moment of *kairos* in regards to the challenges raised by human sexuality today? Is there a desire on the part of some churches to address these issues together as a fellowship of churches in search of visible unity?

Is there a danger in relying on a purely secular response to the issues at hand without any reference to faith? How can the church remain in dialogue with many of its younger members who believe their churches have not responded adequately to the breadth of the challenges we face?

This ecumenical conversation will draw upon the experiences of churches, families and individuals around the world as it seeks to help the ecumenical movement move forward in addressing the theological and ethical concerns raised by issues of human sexuality.

The **first session** will review the present reality through a sharing of stories, hopes and struggles. It will address some of the questions facing the church and will include theological reflections on human sexuality as "a gift from God".

The **second session** will draw on church statements, positions and experiences. It will listen to ways in which issues of human sexuality have been addressed through individual churches, within confessional families, across the ecumenical movement and among theologians.

The **third session** will ask in which direction a fellowship of churches seeking unity might "go from here" as it contends with the issues, attempts to listen to the concerns of its members, and seeks to offer a theological response marked by grace and transformation

## **5. Keeping the faith in a cyber-world: Christian communities and new technologies**

New information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as mobile phones, e-mail, internet, networked computers and digital television are influencing more and more areas of life all over the world. The way people learn and think about their environment, relate and communicate to each other, judge situations and make decisions are all affected by the growing presence of new technologies and the immense volume of information, messages, values and cultural patterns they convey. Paradoxically the "digital divide", be it an economic, cultural or generational divide, influences who has access to technology and who does not.

Christians are not exempt of this influence in their daily lives. Nor is the church as community of believers. Technology has the potential to transform the ways in which we worship in local congregations. Activities and areas of experience that have traditionally been found within a

physical congregation - prayer groups, spiritual direction, biblical teachings, theological discussions, and even worship - can and are accessed through the new ICTs. These "virtual congregations" - with varying scopes, goals, origin and composition - are growing.

At different speeds and with different levels of enthusiasm established churches are addressing this phenomenon. As the body of Christ in which all the members are interrelated (1 Cor. 12:26) the church cannot ignore new forms of interconnection that defy time and space. Aware of the gift of the Holy Spirit to break barriers of communication for the sharing of the gospel (Acts 2:6) the church is attentive to the appearance of new languages and means of communication. But since at the same time it is called not to simply accommodate to the world but to actively transform it (Rom. 12:2) its approach is a critical one.

In addressing the effect of new technologies on Christian life, churches are confronted with a number of questions: What is its impact on the institutional dimension of the church? How can these technologies strengthen church administration and enrich worship life. How can they strengthen ecumenical commitments? What is the place of the "virtual congregation" in the traditional understanding of what means to be church? What dimensions of the Christian experience be mediated through new ICTs (i.e. "virtualized")?

The **first session** will take stock of global trends and discuss how new technologies are influencing the life of persons, families, communities and societies - shaping people's way of life, their values and their beliefs. Participants will contribute elements from their specific contexts - from across the "digital divides".

The **second session** will offer space for sharing how churches are addressing the phenomena in their particular contexts. Participants are invited to learn from each other about different experiences and theological approaches.

The **third session** of the conversation will explore the ecumenical priorities in this field. How the new information and communication technologies influence the ecumenical journey and what opportunities they



offer for a fellowship of churches seeking unity. What are the common responsibilities and the possibilities for cooperation?

## **6. Disabled people: a church of all and for all**

The church of Christ is a welcoming place for all irrespective of our differences. As St Paul has demonstrated in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 the church is the body of Christ and it is made up of many parts. It cannot be complete if it excludes any of these parts. All the parts have individual functions and even those that are seemingly weak, are indispensable. However this has not been the experience of persons with disabilities who have felt excluded in spiritual, social, economic and the structural life of the church. Their exclusion has been experienced through various barriers worst of which are those related to attitudes. There are so few persons with disabilities involved in any way in the ecumenical movement.

The main reason for their exclusion in the life of the church may be explained through an understanding of the struggle between the strong and the weak. As a seemingly weak group, they are considered to have no contribution to make and therefore a burden. Where their needs have been addressed, this has been done through a spirit of charity and choice rather than a conviction to do so as a defining characteristic of the church. If the church is to be truly the body that it is, it has to make a paradigm shift in dealing with disability issues from a charity perspective to a more empowering and inclusive theology. Signs of this departure have been experienced through the work of a few churches.

A number of the fundamental themes explored in the WCC interim theological statement "A Church of All and for All" have given some pointers to what the place of persons with disabilities in the church should be. Three of these are of particular interest: hermeneutics, *imago Dei* and healing. This conversation will revolve around these themes and their implication for the opening of the doors for full participation of persons with disabilities in the life of the church

The **first session** will provide the space to listen to personal experiences by persons with disabilities in their interaction with the

church. It will discuss what it means for persons with disabilities to be part of the church for all and what the new testament healing stories communicate in the contemporary church.

The **second session** will provide opportunity for churches that have made progress in the inclusion and active involvement of persons with disabilities in their worship and structural life to share their experiences.

The **third session** will explore ways of opening doors into the future through such measures as removal of physical, social and attitudinal barriers and in engaging in a reflection on the ecumenical challenges before us.