



God, in your grace,
transform the world

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The Churches and the Search for Visible Unity

The search for visible unity, the primary goal of the ecumenical movement, is intrinsically linked to how churches understand themselves, how they organize their own lives, and how they relate to each other and to the world. In theological language, these are "ecclesiological" issues. Therefore, when churches talk about "unity" they also talk about "ecclesiology".

The WCC 9th Assembly is expected to adopt a document which addresses the two issues (see below). The document comes out of a long history of dialogue about how churches engaged in the ecumenical movement understand each other, the councils of churches to which they belong, and the goal of "visible unity".

Churches in relation to one another

The phrase "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" describes the nature of the Christian community - its unity, sanctity, universality and apostolicity (i.e. continuity with the earliest Christian faith and churches). The phrase appears in the Nicene Creed, which was first adopted in 325 and later revised in 381, and which still enjoys the widest acceptance among Christians.

Two basic self-understandings among churches might be distinguished:

- Some churches, such as the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, understand themselves as **the** "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church".

- Other churches, such as many Protestant churches, see themselves as **part** of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church".

When churches with different self-understandings join in a "fellowship of churches", questions arise: To what extent do they recognize each other as the church? How might that recognition affect their own self-understanding?

The "Toronto statement", received by the central committee in 1950, tried to clarify concerns dating back to the founding of the WCC by stating that membership does not "imply that a church treats its own conception of the church as merely relative" or accepts a "specific doctrine concerning the nature of church unity". And while

membership of the church of Christ "is more inclusive" than the membership in one's own church body, membership in the WCC "does not imply that each church must regard the other members as churches in the true and full sense of the word".

Since the Toronto statement, the emphasis on understanding differences among churches and engaging in cooperative mission and service has evolved to actively ensure that churches would, in future, draw more closely together rather than move further apart.

WCC assemblies have made major statements about the nature of the unity that churches seek but, for some, the Toronto statement still articulates their basic understanding of ecumenical relationships.

A brief history of Christian division . . .

Since 313, when Constantine granted Christians the freedom to worship, there have been a number of major divisions among Christian traditions:

The separation between the **Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox families of churches** can be traced back to the council of Chalcedon in 451, which was accepted by the Eastern Orthodox family (all those churches which today are in communion with the see of Constantinople) and was not recognized by the Oriental Orthodox (today known as the Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean and [Indian] Malankara churches).

The Great or Eastern Schism between the East (the Orthodox) and the West (Roman Catholic). Relations between Eastern and Western Christian traditions became progressively strained. Differences in theology, liturgy and authority were aggravated by political and cultural clashes. While the schism occurred over centuries, it is often dated to 1054, when official charges (anathemas) were exchanged.

The **Protestant Reformation** was a series of interrelated religious, social and political movements out of which, in the 16th century, Lutheran and Reformed churches, among others, emerged. Its symbolic beginning is dated to October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther posted an open invitation to debate 95 theses concerning the teaching and practice of indulgences within the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1534, **The Act of Supremacy** put King Henry VIII at the head of the church in England.

The **Radical Reformation** rejected both the Roman Catholic tradition and the Protestant alternatives to it, for what they considered as true or apostolic Christianity. This led to traditions such as Anabaptism and Pietism.

Churches in relation to the World Council of Churches

From its founding, the WCC was understood as an instrument through which the churches could bear witness together. What was not clear in 1948 was what the spiritual nature of the fellowship implied for the nature - and limits - of the WCC.

The Toronto Statement stated that the WCC:

- Is not and must never become a super-church
- Does not negotiate union between churches
- Cannot and should not be based on any one particular conception of the church

This "ecclesiological neutrality" has been questioned as the functions and purposes of the WCC have evolved. For instance, the WCC has been perceived by some churches to be developing ecclesial characteristics such as its own liturgy, or taking positions that seem to risk imposing doctrines or practices on member churches.

The chapter on "The Self-Understanding of the World Council of Churches" in the statement "Towards a Common Understanding and Vision" (1997) picks up the idea of the Council as an "ecclesiological challenge" to its member churches. It notes that while different churches may understand the use of the word "fellowship" in the Council's basis in different ways, the term does at least suggest "that the Council is more than a mere functional association of churches set up to organize activities in areas of common interest".

The current document "Called to be the One Church"

Before the Harare Assembly in 1998, Orthodox churches raised concerns that the WCC was "in danger of becoming an entity parallel to the churches and not an instrument of the churches."

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/whol/cretepost-01-e.html>

They also expressed concerns that the WCC was assuming a particular eccle-

siastical understanding of "visible unity". The Harare Assembly established the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC to study these and other criticisms and make proposals for any necessary changes.

In its Final Report in 2002, the Special Commission indicated some ecclesiological issues that needed further study and clarification. With this in mind, and in view of the tradition of assembly statements on unity, central committee requested that the WCC Faith and Order Commission organize a process leading to a statement on ecclesiology for the 9th Assembly.

This is the text "Called to be the One Church. An invitation to the churches to renew their commitment to the search for unity and to deepen their dialogue" (available in the WCC 9th Assembly Programme Book, pp. 107-110). <http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/official-working-documents/ecclesiology.html>

It seeks to state what the churches can say together about the church, to affirm the churches' commitment to

one another within the ecumenical fellowship, and to encourage a renewed and more intense discussion on issues which still divide them. It is offered for adoption not as a definitive or final statement, but as an invitation to further and deeper dialogue.

This material is intended as background information for media and does not necessarily reflect WCC policy. Media contact: media@wcc-coe.org +41-79-507-6363

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- Rev. **Joseph Small**, Presbyterian Church, USA
- Rev. **Risto Saarinen**, Lutheran Church, Finland
- Rev. Dr **Thomas Best**, director, WCC Faith and Order Commission

... and some efforts towards unity: Key WCC documents

Currently, the membership of the World Council of Churches represents 18 church "families": African instituted; Anglican; Assyrian; Baptist; Disciples; Free; Hussite; Independent; Lutheran; Mar Thoma; Methodist; Non-denominational; Old-Catholic; Eastern Orthodox; Oriental Orthodox; Pentecostal; Reformed; United and Uniting. Major milestones, from the ecclesiological perspective, have been:

1948 Founding Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam. Delegates from 147 churches declared that "We intend to stay together", and officially founded the WCC. The basis of the WCC was articulated as: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour." Important implications of the basis are: 1) as a fellowship of churches, the WCC cannot exercise any constitutional authority over the member churches; and 2) the WCC stands on faith in Jesus Christ, but churches have the freedom to interpret that faith in their own way.

1950 The Toronto Statement. Received by the central committee with the title "The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches - The Ecclesiological Significance of the World Council of Churches".

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/whol/morges-01-e.html>

1961 New Delhi (3rd WCC Assembly) Statement on Unity, and Orthodox Response. Paragraph 2 is one of the seminal and enduring statements on the nature of "organic unity". <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/whol/crete-02-e.html>

The New Delhi Assembly adopted the reformulated basis that remains to the present day: "The World Council of Churches is

a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

1982 Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM). This Faith and Order "convergence text" has become one of the most widely read and discussed ecumenical texts in modern times, and has been the basis of numerous inter-church agreements. Churches' responses to it showed an impressive degree of agreement on baptism, although questions of eucharist and ministry persist. <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/bem1.html>

1991 Canberra (7th WCC Assembly) Statement. "The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling." The document states that "The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness".

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/canb.html>

1997 Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches. Adopted by the central committee in 1997 and commended to the churches. Acknowledged by the 8th WCC Assembly in 1998 as the "framework and point of reference" for the WCC's work in the future.

<http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/whol/cuv-e.html>

2002 Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches. Cf. WCC 9th Assembly Programme Book, pp.69-103 <http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/policy-documents/special-commission.html>