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transform the world

World Council of Churches  
9th Assembly  
14-23 February 2006  
Porto Alegre, Brazil

## Praying together at WCC gatherings

*The liturgical experiences of previous WCC assemblies and major gatherings have inspired many people, as well as confronted participants with unfamiliar or uncomfortable symbols, rites, and practices that come from different confessions and cultures. Many also consider that it is in "ecumenical worship" that the divisions among Christians - such as the inability of all Christians to celebrate the Eucharist together - become the most apparent.*

The issue of whether, how and to what extent Christians can worship or even pray together is at the heart of the ecumenical quest and therefore also of the relationships that churches maintain by their belonging to the WCC fellowship.

The WCC Constitution establishes that "the primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe."

The Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches, issued in 2002, was the latest attempt to provide guidelines for worship and prayer in major WCC gatherings.

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.

### **How has worship been celebrated at past WCC assemblies?**

The worship of early assemblies was based on denominational models largely from North America and from Europe. As WCC membership grew and became more diverse, new dimensions of worship and prayer came in

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the form of symbols, music and movement.

The Vancouver (1983) and Canberra (1991) assemblies not only held a Eucharist service known as the "Lima Liturgy", but also incorporated a greater amount of indigenous material in the assembly liturgies (such as hymns, lyrics, vestments, actions, art) and of women-identified prayers, songs and other liturgical texts. In addition to

worship from specific church traditions, a practice developed of drawing liturgical elements from different ecclesial and cultural traditions into one worship service.

From the early 1990s, some Orthodox delegates started to abstain from participating in ecumenical services. A report from Thessaloniki (May 1998) that articulated a number of criticisms of the WCC specifically asked Eastern Orthodox participants at the Harare Assembly "not to participate in ecumenical services, common prayers, worship and other religious ceremonies at the Assembly".

The Harare Assembly established the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC to address a number of grievances articulated primarily by Orthodox churches, relating in part to worship and common prayer.

### **What have been some of the criticisms of "ecumenical worship" in the past?**

An impression among some that the ecumenical movement was reaching for a common liturgy - such as the Lima liturgy - that had the authority to

#### **Ecumenical discussions on worship:**

**1952:** Discussion of the report "Ways of Worship" at the 3rd world conference on Faith and Order (Lund) was the first time worship was explicitly on the agenda of an ecumenical conference: "In worship, we meet the problem, nay, rather the sin of the disunion of the church, in its sharpest form."

**1963:** The 4th world conference on Faith and Order in Montreal discussed the report "Worship and the Oneness of Christ's Church". Informed by regional reflections, it included for the first time an East Asian perspective on understanding worship and on its indigenization.

**Vatican II (1962-65)** allowed for greater participation of Roman Catholics in ecumenical prayer.

**1968:** Worship was one of the six thematic sections at the WCC's 4th Assembly in Uppsala.

**1969:** Faith and Order consultation on "Worship Today" (Geneva).

**1982:** The "Lima Liturgy", as it has become known, is the eucharistic liturgy prepared for the Faith and Order commission meeting held in Lima, Peru. The liturgy is based on the convergence statement Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM). The Lima liturgy was used at both the 6th assembly of the WCC in Vancouver in 1983 and at the 7th assembly in Canberra in 1991.

**1993:** The fifth Faith and Order world conference in Santiago de Compostela urged "renewed attention to the inter-relationships between worship and the search for unity".

**1994:** The Faith and Order consultation at Ditchingham, England, "Towards Koinonia in Worship", focused, among other things, on ways of worship which are unifying.

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/vilemov-06-e.html>

### For further information:

Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC

<http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/special-01-e.html>

Final Report of the Special Commission (2002): WCC 9th Assembly Programme Book, pp. 69-103

<http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/policy-documents/special-commission.html>

enable member churches of the WCC to celebrate Eucharist together. Celebrations of the Eucharist in ecumenical settings which led to pain, as not all were able to participate. (The lack of universal recognition of each confession's baptism into the Church, as well as differences in the meaning and practice of the Eucharist, prevent some Christians from celebrating the Eucharist together.)

Rites, symbols, and symbolic actions taken from one cultural or confessional setting and placed in "ecumenical worship" are not always used sensitively or in a way that is faithful to their original meaning.

Issues such as the ordination of women remain divisive.

### Why has the term "common prayer" replaced "ecumenical worship"?

The term "ecumenical worship", that was used very widely among the English-speaking Protestant churches, created difficulties when translated, especially into an Orthodox setting. Worship in an Orthodox setting refers to the liturgy, which always includes the celebration of the Eucharist. "Ecumenical worship", in addition, gave the impression that the ecumenical movement had reached the point where a common liturgy existed, or that the WCC itself was issuing its own liturgy, which it cannot do.

The term "common prayer" was suggested to avoid these various misunderstandings, although this term itself may create its own difficulties when translated into other languages, this time on the Protestant side.

### What were the recommendations from the Special Commission regarding common prayer, and to whom do they apply?

The first affirmation was that "the call to pray together continues to be of primary importance" and thus a way forward needs to be found to "allow all to pray together with integrity, on the way toward visible unity" (paragraph 41).

The Special Commission recommended that clarity be added to existing practice by making a clear distinction between "confessional" and "interconfessional" common prayer at WCC gatherings. "Confessional" common prayer comes out of one church tradition. An occasion of "interconfessional" common prayer draws resources from a variety of traditions, but does not claim to be the worship of any given church or super-church.

Eucharistic celebrations at WCC gatherings would be possible on the occasion of "confessional" common prayer where the identity of the hosting church, or group of churches, is clearly identified.

A "Framework for Common Prayer at WCC Gatherings" was included as an appendix to the Final Report. The framework addresses the need to develop sensitivity to and understanding for the way in which particular forms of worship, hymns, symbols and language could lead to misunderstandings and create barriers for participation and exclude some who should in fact be fully included. The framework refers to problems concerning inclusive language, as well as the fact that

the ordination of women is not accepted in all WCC member churches.

The Framework is intended for WCC gatherings such as assemblies, central committee meetings, and other large meetings held under WCC auspices. It is not intended to be "universally applicable within the ecumenical movement".

### Does the Framework for Common Prayer prohibit women from taking leadership roles?

The framework does not forbid ordained women from taking leadership roles. Rather, it attempts to defuse the question of women's ordination, which divides Protestants as well as Orthodox and Roman Catholics. In the case of "interconfessional" prayer (Appendix A, paragraph 30), ordained status is played-down altogether, for women and men alike, in order not to give signals of ecclesial identity. Thus anyone can take part, and leadership is open to women and men, ordained and lay. When a prayer service is offered "confessionally", the confession's practice and tradition is followed regarding the ordination of women.

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

### Resource Persons:

- Metropolitan **Gennadios of Sassima**, Patriarchate of Constantinople, Turkey
- Rev. **Cybele Kuss**, Lutheran, Brazil
- Mr **Vasily Chernov**, Russian Orthodox Church
- Rev. **Susan Henry Crow**, United Methodist, USA
- Bishop Dr. **Richard Aboagyee Mensah**, Methodist, Ghana
- Rev. **Dessordi Perse Leite**, Anglican, Brazil
- Rev. Dr **Michael Hawn**, Southern Baptist, USA
- Rev. Dr **Tércio Junker**, Methodist, Brazil

### Other examples of "ecumenical prayer"

**Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.** Its inspiration goes back to calls for prayers for unity in the second half of the 18th century. In 1966, the WCC's Faith and Order Commission and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity began their official joint preparation of the Week of Prayer material.

<http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/wop2006contents.html>

**World Day of Prayer.** A worldwide movement of Christian women welcomes all people to observe a common day of prayer on the first Friday of March each year.

<http://www.worlddayofprayer.net/>

Fellowship of the Least Coin. This focus on the smallest coin of each country's currency, offered with a prayer for peace, was conceived in 1965 by the Asian Christian Women's Conference.

**Ecumenical Prayer Cycle.** A book of prayers for each area of the world was produced initially in response to a request from the WCC 5th Assembly in Nairobi, 1975, that ways be found of deepening spiritual bonds among the churches of the world.

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/01-02.html>