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FOR DISCUSSION

## The next WCC assembly: Towards an expanded space

*An assembly is the supreme governing body of the World Council of Churches. It is a unique gathering of churches and ecumenical partners in common prayer, celebration, discussion and deliberation. An assembly is composed of delegates, elected by member churches, and other delegated representative and observers representing a variety of ecumenical partners and non-member churches. An assembly also gathers the wider ecumenical of networks, ministries and individuals. The delegates to an assembly are responsible for electing presidents, a central committee, determining the overall policies of the WCC and reviewing the programmatic work of the council. Decisions are taken by consensus. The next WCC assembly, scheduled for 2013, will be the tenth such gathering.*

### I. Understanding the Porto Alegre mandate

The Porto Alegre assembly, meeting in February 2006, articulated the vision of pursuing an “ecumenical assembly that would assemble all churches to celebrate their fellowship in Jesus Christ and to address common challenges facing the church and humanity”, with the particular hope that this would represent a significant step “toward visible unity and a shared Eucharist” (PRC paragraphs 5).

This same vision was further elaborated through the recommendation “to explore the feasibility of a structure for WCC assemblies that would provide expanded space for Christian world communions and confessional families to meet, for the purpose of deliberation and/or overall agenda” (PRC paragraph 25d).

*Central committee* – Based on an evaluation of the Porto Alegre Assembly and a provisional schedule for preparing the 10th Assembly, the central committee, meeting in September 2006, established a process of listening and reflecting on the Porto Alegre mandate to explore the feasibility of an ecumenical assembly, with the expectation that an initial decision would be taken on the type of assembly to be held in 2013 by the central committee when it meets in February 2008, so as to inform preparations from the beginning.

The matter was referred to the executive committee, recommending that “more reflection about the meaning and significance of a ‘common ecumenical assembly’ be undertaken” (joint report of the programme and policy reference committees, paragraph 30).

*Executive committee* – The WCC executive committee, meeting in February 2007, received and discussed an initial paper on the topic which raised a series of fundamental questions about language, fellowship and the coherence of the ecumenical movement.

The executive committee began with the assumption that an “ecumenical assembly” will only be feasible if a common vision and language can be found to express the significance of such an event as a

visible sign of the churches' commitment to unity and desire for mutual accountability. A WCC assembly that provides "expanded space for Christian world communions and confessional families" is best pursued in ways that help the churches to grow together in the fellowship they share through membership in the WCC.

The executive committee considered the term "ecumenical assembly" problematic and affirmed that all WCC assemblies are ecumenical by nature. They also affirmed the need to consider potential cooperation not only with Christian world communions, but also with national councils, regional councils, international ecumenical organizations and specialized ministries, i.e. all the stake holders in an assembly – the affiliated partners sending official representation as per the WCC Constitution and Rules.<sup>1</sup>

*History of preceding discussions* – The Porto Alegre vision of an ecumenical assembly was preceded by nearly a decade of discussion on the possibility of joint or common assemblies between the WCC, WARC and LWF, which all hold similar types of decision-making gatherings every seven to eight years.

The vision was also preceded by nearly a decade of discussion and planning toward a Christian forum that would bring together the fellowship of WCC member churches, Christian world communions and churches not holding membership in the WCC, i.e. Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. For example, in the working draft of the policy document "Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC" there was a proposal to consider "finding alternative models of an assembly within the context of the forum" to which the WCC would invite other ecumenical organizations, Christian world communions and churches not holding WCC membership (cf. working draft of the policy statement, 1996, p.30).<sup>2</sup>

A comprehensive article describing the history of this dialogue is available in the July-October 2006 edition of the Ecumenical Review. It is called "Towards a common global ecumenical assembly?" and was written by Stephen Brown.

## II. Report from the listening process

In April 2007, at the request of the executive committee and to facilitate the listening process, the general secretary wrote to all WCC member churches, regional ecumenical organizations (REOs), national councils of churches (NCCs), Christian world communions (CWCs), international ecumenical organizations (IEOs) and specialized ministries (SMs), requesting feedback on the feasibility of a "WCC assembly that would gather all churches and offer expanded space to partner ecumenical organizations". Like the WCC, the foundation of the various ecumenical instruments named here are the churches themselves.

In addition to processing written feedback, the WCC secretariat also sought to take advantage of key ecumenical moments during 2007. What follows is a summary of what was heard. A list of churches and partners that replied is attached as appendix 1.

*What was heard* – The **fellowship of WCC member churches** that either responded or participated in the May 2007 ecumenical officers meeting generally support the pursuit of an expanded assembly and

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<sup>1</sup> According to WCC Rules, regional ecumenical organizations (REOs), national council of churches (NCCs), Christian world communions (CWCs), international ecumenical organizations (IEOs), specialized ministries (SMs) that are affiliated with the WCC are invited by the central committee to send a *delegated representative* to WCC assemblies. Non-member churches, with whom the WCC has a special relationship, may also be invited by the central committee to send a *delegated observer* to a WCC assembly. Both *delegated representatives* and *delegated observers* have the right to speak, but not to participate in WCC decision-making processes.

<sup>2</sup> The "forum" mentioned here refers to was proposed as "forum of Christian Churches and Ecumenical Organisations", and has subsequently been developed as the Global Christian Forum.

agree with the initial directions outlined in the letter from the general secretary (letter to member churches, April 2007).

The number of world, regional and confessional assemblies was critiqued by some as a financial burden, but more churches critiqued the multiplicity of unrelated processes of preparation and follow-up as a sign of ecumenical fragmentation. Concern was expressed that small churches and “minority” confessions are not overshadowed by the interest of large churches or institutionally organized church families. The importance of how the participation of ecumenical partner organizations would be encouraged in preparing an expanded assembly was highlighted by many respondents.

A principle concern raised by many churches was the desire to preserve the integrity of a WCC assembly as the principal gathering through which the member churches deepen their mutual accountability in the search for visible unity and set the agenda for the work of the WCC.

*What was heard* – The **Joint Consultative Commission between the WCC and CWCs**, meeting in May 2007, considered it necessary for the WCC to retain ownership/leadership of an expanded or ecumenical assembly as a WCC event, not so as to pursue institutional interests, but to nurture the ecumenical movement. The communions suggested that the minimal criteria for the event should be:

- To enhance the role of the WCC as a fellowship of churches;
- To enhance the role of the WCC in nurturing the one ecumenical movement;
- To rely on the basis of the WCC to determine participation (Article I of the WCC Constitution which affirms Christ as Lord and Savior, belief in the trinity and refers to the authority of scripture).

Some communions expressed the desire for the WCC to be more open to significant change – to transform the *status quo* – so as to do something new and not simply restructure the existing model of a WCC assembly.

*What was heard* – The **Permanent Committee on Consensus and Collaboration**, meeting in November 2007, discussed the issue, recognizing the value of an expanded assembly in working towards the coherence of the ecumenical movement. The committee affirmed that the ethos of the WCC and the fruits of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC should not be put at risk by such an event. They were particularly concerned that such a space could marginalize Orthodox and other churches that are not organized as Christian world communions.

*What was heard* – The **World Alliance of Reformed Churches** executive committee, meeting in October 2007, responded with support for the initiative, but also expressed concern that any model for the event that would offer communions space for conducting business “after” the WCC assembly had concluded would be unsatisfactory, as it would symbolize a new form of ecumenical fragmentation.

*What was heard* – The conference of secretaries of **Christian world communions**, which met in November 2007 directly after participating in the **Global Christian Forum (GCF)**, expressed wide-ranging interest, with some questioning the focus on space for “doing business”. Some expressed concern that the WCC might be moving away from the Porto Alegre vision. Others expressed concern that the business agendas of other communions could unduly influence the agenda of the WCC. And others noted that space offered for doing business would not engage their communion.

The following was heard as the CWCs contribution to the listening the process:

- The GCF is the best space to encounter churches that have difficulty in associating with the WCC.
- The value of WCC ownership versus WCC leadership in such an event is not commonly agreed.
- Various models should be considered in order to identify the one model that will engage the widest number of communions.
- Any wider assembly should be planned with the communions most interested.

- For a wider assembly to foster coherence, a greater sense/understanding of the value of complementarity is needed – the complementarity of different models and instruments in promoting unity.
- The WCC should exercise caution in preparing a wider assembly, recognizing that gains in one direction may present risks in another.

*What was heard* – The Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century, which draws together representatives of WCC member church, REOs, NCCs, IEOs and SMs, discussed the proposal at length. They raised a number of issues that had not yet been articulated, but which are important to consider. The group emphasized the rapidly changing ecumenical context and the need for an expanded assembly to be planned in tune with these dynamics.

The group suggested that coherence can also be described as a process of “gifting” by which each church and ecumenical partner understands its particular gift to the ecumenical movement and how it is enriched by the gifts of others. They suggested that complementarity is best achieved by constructing links between churches and partners, not simply expecting them to emerge in a common time and place. Other insights included:

- Fears about pursuing an expanded assembly should not be seen as barriers keeping us from moving forward, but as challenges we are called to overcome.
- An expanded assembly should be an event that brings the ecumenical family together. As such, any space offered to recognized partners, should not be “guest” space, but “family” space.
- Preparing and implementing an expanded assembly with recognized ecumenical partners will necessarily help to articulate common vision about the churches’ search for unity and common witness.
- Though different communions would use the space provided to them in different ways, an expanded assembly should challenge all church families to recognize the diversity that exists within their own communion or confessional grouping of churches.
- An expanded assembly should provide significant opportunity for ecumenical formation and not repeat the pre-assembly model, for youth in particular.
- How would the post-expanded assembly process help to facilitate outcomes, promote coherence and more deeply engage the churches as the primary agents of their ecumenical instruments?
- How will an expanded assembly also be a more inclusive assembly?

### **III. A new style of assembly – a synthesis of what was heard**

The listening process revealed strong interest in a new style of WCC-led assembly that will gather churches and ecumenical partners to celebrate fellowship in Jesus Christ, to address common challenges facing the churches, to shape a more coherent ecumenical movement and to fulfil the business of the WCC member churches.

The listening process revealed concrete proposals for how to structure such an event. Not one model meets all needs, but there is a convergence of opinion that the best model will be the one that promotes the churches’ ownership of their ecumenical commitments and engages the widest platform of recognized ecumenical partners.

Such an assembly, in how it is planned, implemented and followed-up, should help to forge a greater coherence of the one ecumenical movement. The WCC is well placed to take the lead in preparing such an ecumenical gathering. The WCC can, at the same time, fulfil the constitutional mandate of gathering the fellowship of churches in a deliberative assembly.

## **An ecumenical framework**

The Common Understanding and Vision (CUV) process developed the two-pronged approach of deepening the fellowship of member churches and broadening participation in the ecumenical movement. This approach has borne significant fruits, which include the results of the Special Commission on the Participation of Orthodox Churches in the WCC, the implementation of consensus procedures, the work of the joint working group with Pentecostals, renewed relations with Evangelicals and the Global Christian Forum.

*Coherence and the unity we seek* – The Porto Alegre assembly confirmed that the dual approach to deepen and broaden the WCC fellowship should continue, but also brought renewed attention to the constitutional role of the WCC member churches to ensure the coherence of the one ecumenical movement (Article III). The desire to deepen the sense of fellowship among member churches and to broaden the cooperation of ecumenical partners as the instruments of the churches are, in fact, two significant means to ensure the coherence of the ecumenical movement and the unity we seek.

*Unity through common vision and partnership* – Recognizing that the foundation of all ecumenical instruments are the churches themselves, at this stage in the life of the WCC, ensuring the coherence of the one ecumenical movement requires on the one hand, fostering a common vision among churches and ecumenical partners and, on the other hand, facilitating greater programmatic cooperation among ecumenical actors. It requires bringing the goals of deepening fellowship and broadening participation into more dynamic dialogue. In this way, the churches are encouraged in their active ecumenical vocation.

*Leadership by the churches through the WCC* – The coherence of the one ecumenical movement can be strengthened by the creative and directed interaction among churches and ecumenical partners. The WCC has been repeatedly affirmed by member churches and ecumenical partners as the most equipped, unique and preferred instrument to facilitate this. The WCC can, however, only facilitate this through the leadership of its member churches. It is the churches themselves, who through the council, serve the one ecumenical movement (Article III, WCC Constitution).

## **An organisational framework**

From the response of both member churches and ecumenical partners, it is clear that such an event should be developed according to criteria already articulated in the WCC Constitution and Rules. This includes criteria to determine who participates and the basic goals for such an event.

*Basis of the WCC* – The most appropriate basis to determine the churches that could be invited to such an event is the first article of the WCC Constitution, which identifies the WCC as a “fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. The churches that would be invited, therefore, are the WCC members churches and other churches that confess Christ as Lord and Saviour according to the scripture, and profess faith in the triune God.

*Enhancing the fellowship of member churches* – One of the fundamental goals of such an event would be to enhance the fellowship of member churches and to engage them in giving direction to the WCC and the wider ecumenical movement. In order to achieve this it is necessary to adhere closely to the vision of CUV and to the recommendations and spirit of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. The distribution of WCC delegates, the ethos of fellowship, the spirit of consensus, the accord of common prayer and confessional Eucharist, must all help to shape the event.

Particular concern should be given to enhancing fellowship with Orthodox churches, small churches and churches not organized as global communions. Many of these churches did not respond to the request for feedback.

*Recognized ecumenical partners* – Another fundamental goal of such an event would be to foster greater coherence of the one ecumenical movement. In order to achieve this it is necessary to have the full cooperation and participation of the churches' conciliar instruments, confessional instruments, international ministries and mission agencies. The REOs, NCCs, CWCs, IEOs, SMs and CWME bodies that are constitutionally affiliated with the WCC could be asked to take an increased role in helping to shape and facilitate the event. Their cooperation in the follow up to the event is just as crucial.

It is also necessary to consider how to best involve the wider ecumenical movement, including networks, academies, grass-roots organizations, congregations, etc., that are not constitutionally affiliated with the WCC, but which are well known to churches. They have been involved in past assemblies.

*Other churches* – Still another fundamental goal of such an event would be to foster the participation of churches that are not members of the WCC. Previous assemblies have had significant participation of Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. The preparation of this event would build on this tradition, while seeking also to take advantage of the new possibilities offered by a rapidly changing Christian landscape. This of course depends very much on the responsiveness of "other churches". Minimally, the assembly should reflect the progress made in building relationship and working collaboratively.

#### **IV. Possible ways forward**

The listening process revealed a number of concrete proposals for how to structure such an event. Not one model meets all needs, but there is a convergence of opinion that the best model will be the one that promotes the churches' ownership of their ecumenical commitments and engages the widest platform of recognized ecumenical partners. The listening process also revealed the challenge to establish more coordinated forms of preparation, theme and issue development, as well as coherent follow-up.

The listening process affirmed that the success of an expanded assembly in 2013 depends on how the event is planned and with whom it is planned. In the past, WCC assemblies were planned by committees representing member churches and did not significantly involve other constituent representatives. The feedback and wisdom of previous experience indicates that already at a planning stage, ecumenical partners, particularly those having a vested interest in a WCC assembly, should be involved.

In response to the vision of an assembly that offers expanded space to ecumenical partners the following fundamental questions warrant consideration by the central committee as it prepares to launch preparation for the next WCC assembly:

- How can a WCC-led collaborative approach to preparing the next assembly facilitate a more coherent ecumenical movement?
- How can an assembly planned in greater cooperation with recognized ecumenical partners help to deepen the fellowship among WCC member churches?
- How can an expanded assembly serve the interest of all WCC member churches, including larger churches, smaller churches, national churches, global churches, churches that have formed communions or confessional bodies and churches that have not formed communions or confessional bodies?
- How can a WCC assembly become an expression of greater coherence of the one ecumenical movement?
- How can the assembly become an incarnational event through which the churches and ecumenical partners forge a more coherent vision and lay the ground work for more programmatic cooperation?

## **V. Central committee plenary discussion**

On 14 February 2008, a full central committee plenary session will provide an opportunity for sharing information, engaging in dialogue and considering the importance of the next assembly for the fellowship of member churches and ecumenical partners.

The central committee discussion will inform the work of the policy reference committee, which will formulate recommendations for further consideration by the central committee.

## Appendix 1 – List of churches and partners responding to the request for feedback

### Member Churches

1. Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia
2. Christian Bible Church (Argentina)
3. Church of Norway
4. Church of Sweden
5. Episcopal Church (USA)
6. Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil
7. Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark
8. Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
9. Evangelical Church of the Rheinland
10. Evangelical Church of the Rio Plate (Argentina/Uruguay)
11. Evangelical Church of Germany
12. Methodist Church in Ireland
13. Moravian Church (Europe)
14. Old Catholic Church in the Netherlands
15. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
16. Protestant Church in the Netherlands
17. Reformed Church in France
18. United Reformed Church (UK)
19. United Church of Christ in Japan
20. United Protestant Church in Belgium

### Councils, Comm unions and Specialized Ministries

21. Anglican Communion Office
22. Inter-Church Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO)
23. Kerkinactie
24. Lutheran World Federation
25. National Council of Churches in the Netherlands
26. Reformed Ecumenical Council
27. World Alliance of Reformed Churches

### Additional opportunities

In addition to processing written feedback, staff sought to take advantage of key ecumenical moments during the year in order to more deeply engage the churches and ecumenical partners in responding. These included:

28. Annual meeting of REO General Secretaries (January)
29. WCC Executive Committee (February)
30. Regular meeting of WCC member church Ecumenical Officers – 60 persons (May)
31. Joint Consultative Commission between the WCC and CWCs (May)
32. WCC Executive Committee (September)
33. WARC Executive Committee (October)
34. WCC Permanent Committee on Collaboration and Consensus (November)
35. Global Christian Forum (November)
36. Annual meeting of the CWCs Conference of Secretaries (November)
37. Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century (November)