



FOR ACTION

**Report of the Assembly Discernment Committee**

*The Assembly Discernment Committee (ADC) met twice under the leadership of H.E. Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima. The following report of the ADC meeting held in March 2009 represents the substantive analysis and theological reflection of the committee. The report includes ten recommendations for consideration by the WCC central committee. Additional information on the work of the assembly discernment committee, including reflections from the November 2008 meeting and various appendices, is provided in document no. 20 (for information).*

**I. An invitation**

1. The report of the Assembly Discernment Committee (ADC) comes to the central committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) recommending an affirmation and encouragement for an open invitation to the next WCC assembly. We have worked faithfully according to the mandate given to us. We have listened, in a spirit of appreciative inquiry, to a variety of views and concerns represented in the committee. We have taken note of the lessons learnt from the past assemblies. We have explored models and developed constructive proposals for the assembly planning committee to build on.
2. We (the ADC) affirm that it is indeed possible to create space for greater involvement and togetherness of all participants in the life of the next assembly, while at the same time preserving the integrity and uniqueness of the WCC as a fellowship of churches, as well as the ethos and method of consensus.
3. We underline the position of the WCC as a “privileged instrument” of the ecumenical movement, although not necessarily its centre, and urge the WCC to be proactive, guided by God’s spirit, in indicating its willingness to convene all who are ready to interact and to talk to each other around one table.
4. Some of us dream of a broadly inclusive ecumenical event providing expanded space and also involving churches and Christian communities who do not currently participate in ecumenical gatherings. For others it is more important to maintain the WCC assembly as a fellowship of member churches.
5. We discern as an objective for the next assembly the facilitation of greater participation and involvement from those ecumenical actors already in a working relationship with the WCC. This means an open invitation to Christian world communions (CWCs), regional ecumenical organizations (REOs), national councils of churches (NCCs), and other ecumenical partners.

*Bridges: A new matrix of relationships*

6. There were high expectations for the ADC. Many of these had to do with the idea of “expanded space”. Yet, as will be seen below, emerging shifts in the landscape have reconfigured the possibilities

for expansion. The recommendations of the ADC, if accepted, will reshape the assembly on the basis of both expansion and reconfiguration:

- a. A much higher level of participation of ecumenical partners in the life of the assembly.
- b. Intentional and planned interaction – bridges between the programmatic decision-making processes of the assembly and the multitude of inputs, events, sharing, prayer, spirituality and celebration going on in the open forum of the assembly. It is difficult to overstate the significance this change may have.
- c. A distinct space for the business agenda, maintaining delegate balances and the ethos of fellowship and consensus decision-making.
- d. The separation of the nomination/election process from the other components of the assembly.
- e. The inclusion of and consultation with stakeholders, such as youth/young adults, specialized ministries, CWCs, REOs, NCCs and other ecumenical partners, in the planning process.

#### *Theological foundations*

7. We reaffirm that the ecumenical movement is a gift from God to the churches. The churches need to deepen their experience of one another through the ecumenical movement. The WCC assembly is a unique space for this mutual discovery and encounter.
8. Theological reflection in the face of emerging and changing realities will involve identifying timeless theological truths as well as changeable expressions emerging from diverse contexts, and discerning how best these will inform each other.
9. The WCC is an instrument in the churches' calling one another to unity in faith and fellowship, and their witness to Christ in the world. In these tasks the churches affirm their ecclesial character: *koinonia*, *martyria* and *diakonia*.
10. Consensus – now a defining principle in the life of the WCC – cannot be reduced to a decision-making method alone. It is a way of working together, even a way of being together – an ethos. The way of consensus, arising from the spirit of close fellowship, is the way of conciliarity, which has been at the heart of church life since its origins, and which in turn ultimately has its roots in the life of the Holy Trinity.
11. The coherence of the search for unity is therefore part of God's vocation which the churches are called upon to discern and act on.
12. The decisions that emerge from an assembly must be impacted by its wider life. In this way they will more faithfully reflect God's will and work in the churches, in the wider ecumenical movement, and in the world.

## **II. A coherent and integrated assembly**

#### *We came, we discerned, we built models*

13. Proposals from Christian world communions to explore new models of relationship to the WCC assembly, the experience of past assemblies, together with other emerging realities, gave rise to the ADC's mandate to define the objectives of "an expanded space". Our discussions on an expanded space led us to construct a variety of models of what the next assembly might look like.

14. These began as models, constructed with Lego bricks, and evolved into pictorial diagrams. Working in these tangible and visible media gave a great sense of freedom to “think outside the box” and to envisage new possibilities.
15. While the original intention had everything to do with expansion, we found that the diagrams were nearly unanimous in drawing attention to the importance of the relationships among and between member churches and ecumenical partners, and therefore the bridges that need to be built between the assembly components. The emphasis in this report is not be on the models themselves, but on the objectives and principles they embody. We have confidence that our proposals will lead to a new and fresh experience of the next assembly, even if the newness may take different forms than those originally expected.

#### *Components of an assembly*

16. WCC assemblies have typically consisted of several components, which we list in no order of priority.
  - a. Deliberation and decision-making: The assembly has a “business” dimension, which elects a new central committee, determines the overall policies of the council and reviews programmes undertaken to implement policies previously adopted. This dimension is what the WCC Constitution identifies as the “assembly” (*cf.* WCC Constitution, Article V.1.c), although it has been common to use “assembly” to refer to the entire event, in all its dimensions.
  - b. Padare/Mutirão: Particularly since the 8<sup>th</sup> assembly (Harare), WCC assemblies have embraced a wider dimension of the ecumenical movement within the life of the assembly. In a “marketplace” setting – also conceivable as a setting for sowing and harvesting – a broader constituency of partners from within and outside the WCC’s membership, as well as interested persons from all walks of life, come to share their work and experience through an array of workshops, hearings, displays and other events.
  - c. Spiritual life: All dimensions of the assembly are nourished by prayer life where all participants gather in common praise of God, in His Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Bible studies, typically held in small groups, have contributed considerably to the spiritual life of the assembly as well as to the encounter between people in all the settings of an assembly.
17. The models which we considered, and which we put before the central committee and the assembly planning committee to be named, are primarily focused on more precisely identifying these components, how participation and interaction can be increased, and especially how the components relate to each other.
18. We take note that previous assemblies have encountered problems in balancing coherence and distinction between the assembly components. Some of the business dimensions of the assembly, in particular the nomination and election process, have been seen to dampen the effect of the wider encounter. In Porto Alegre there was significant dissatisfaction with what seemed to be “parallel assemblies” — a “business assembly” and a “Mutirão assembly” — with only limited interaction between the two.
19. As we consider ways in which the total life of the assembly would be expanded, we seek at the same time to preserve a clear and distinct place for the deliberative and decision-making business of the assembly – as described in the ADC mandate – but also to fully integrate all the components of the assembly. The ADC seeks for the next assembly, to build greater opportunities for mutual enrichment and interaction, so that the deliberation and the decision-making of the member churches would be nourished by the perspectives and ideas from all the various dimensions of the assembly life, and vice versa.

*Business of an assembly – Governance*

20. We learnt that while creating space that is more open and conducive to trust, more participatory and interactive, it is necessary to distinguish clearly the governance aspect of the WCC assembly from the other components. Thereby, the ADC addressed apprehensions which have to do with the disruption of delicate balances among the delegates in the council's highest governing body, resulting in the marginalization of "Orthodox churches, small churches, and churches not organized as global communions" (*cf.* CC 2008, GEN 03, p.5). We, therefore, propose that the following be established as foundational principles for the planning of the assembly:
- a. That the essential deliberative and decision-making process, i.e., the business part of the assembly, continue to remain with the WCC member churches, maintaining the current delegate balances, and
  - b. That decision-making be conducted in faithful adherence to the ethos of fellowship and consensus procedures.
21. Any benefits of the proposed expansion of the assembly, therefore, would not disrupt the existing balances among the delegates of the member churches, nor the consensus mode of decision-making. These approaches have already been established and are beginning to bear considerable fruit in the life of the WCC through the enormous efforts exerted by the special commission on orthodox participation in the WCC and the permanent committee on consensus and collaboration.

*Business of an assembly – Nomination and Elections*

22. Having thus established delineation between the wider life of the assembly and the "business" life of the assembly, we propose a further distinction: between the nomination/election process and the programmatic deliberation and decision-making.
23. Given how politicized and tense the process of nominations and elections to the central committee is, and given the fact that it has effectively little relationship to the rest of the assembly life, we propose that the central committee consider ways to establish this as a separate dimension of the assembly. This could, for example, take place before the rest of the assembly gets under way. This may help serve to free up the other dimensions of the assembly to take their rightful place in the hearts of the participants, without the preoccupation of elections.

*Bridges: Impact of the wider assembly*

24. Our proposed objectives and principles seek to assure that the governance of the WCC be informed by the wider dimensions of the assembly. One requirement for this to happen is that all participants in the decision-making process be likewise full participants in the harvesting/marketplace dimension of the assembly. In this way the deliberation and "business" of the assembly will receive vital input from the unique gathering of partners from the wider ecumenical movement. In these ways the decision-making of the assembly can hope to be "touched" by the agendas of the wider world.
25. Our proposals thus stipulate days in the assembly programme that are entirely devoted to the Padare/Mutirão dimension of the assembly, so that there is no schedule conflict between the two. This is an example of the kind of linkages that need to be built between the assembly components.

### III. Expanded space

#### *Regional ecumenical organization (REOs) and national council of churches (NCCs)*

26. The REOs and NCCs have been involved in the WCC assemblies all along. In recent years the need for improved relationships and a better understanding of the complementarity of the instruments of conciliar ecumenism have been emphasized. A more intentional interaction with them will help with further progress.

#### *Christian world communions (CWCs)*

27. The Christian world communions have in the past had differing interest in the development of new features in the life of the next WCC assembly. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) envisioned an expanded WCC assembly as a possible space for their respective global gatherings. Recently, both organizations have been rethinking this vision in the face of new and emerging realities, including the forthcoming merger of WARC with the Reformed Ecumenical Council. WARC continues to hope for a WCC assembly model that could also be the time and place of its own global gathering. The LWF is invited to clarify what it would entail to meet and conduct its business on the occasion of a WCC assembly.

28. Other Christian world communions did not have similar ideas of connecting their respective global meetings with an expanded WCC assembly, but had other varying interests in new forms of participation. For the Christian world communions it will be of great importance to look to the model the WCC will eventually adopt for the next assembly. The WCC, for its part, should invite and encourage CWCs to reflect on and articulate their desired involvement in WCC assemblies.

29. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC), being involved in the meeting of the conference of secretaries of the Christian world communions, has followed with interest the process of developing new features of a WCC assembly. While the RCC and the WCC seem to be mutually agreed that full membership is not desirable at this point, the Catholic Church is deeply involved in the WCC through the Joint Working Group, as well as through its full membership in the commission on Faith and Order and the commission on World Mission and Evangelism. It has sent substantial delegations of observers to previous WCC assemblies and is prepared to continue to do so.

#### *Global Christian Forum*

30. The ADC takes note that the Global Christian Forum (GCF) has opened new perspectives of bringing all the main Christian traditions around one table. It is still in a stage of building and nurturing new relationships, especially to strengthen the participation of evangelical and Pentecostal churches and movements and of new emerging churches. The GCF is planning to hold the second Global Forum Gathering at the end of 2011. It is premature to envisage a convergence between the GCF and the vision of an expanded WCC assembly. The ADC encourages efforts to benefit from the experience and achievements of the GCF in order to enhance the participation in the next assembly of Christian churches and communities that do not currently take part in the ecumenical instruments and gatherings.

31. As the WCC has developed several ways of dialogue and consultations with Pentecostal and evangelical churches and movements, it is essential that new features of a WCC assembly nurture their involvement, in an effort to enhance the calling of the WCC to serve Christian unity.

#### *Specialized ministries and international ecumenical organizations*

32. The ADC was further mandated to “give consideration to the possible participation and role of other ecumenical partners, church groups and non-member churches” (cf. 2008 Doc. No. GEN/PRC 04, p.2).

33. Among the ecumenical partners referred to here are Action by Churches Together (ACT), both ACT International and ACT Development, the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, the World Student Christian

Federation, the World Association for Christian Communications and others. With regard to the specialized ministries, who have come together in ACT, the ADC has heard a reaffirmed call for more inclusive ways of participating in WCC assemblies.

34. Specialized ministries are church-based, church-related or ecumenical organizations within the family of WCC member churches, serving the ecumenical movement, particularly in areas such as mission, *diakonia* or development. Through ACT they seek to foster the churches' practical cooperation, showing the world a common brand for Christian relief and development aid, and ensuring the standards of accountability and professionalism required to attract global financing in today's world. They are important stakeholders in the WCC as they fulfill a part of the overall mandate of the churches.
35. The ADC has taken note that there is a need for continued dialogue and sharing of information between member churches and agencies or specialized ministries, and sees a number of ways in which this may be addressed within the framework of the next assembly.
36. One important suggestion is to involve specialized ministries, possibly through ACT, in the planning of the assembly, thereby ensuring both ownership and commitment towards the assembly. Another important suggestion is to facilitate space for dialogue through, e.g., open plenary hearings and workshops where agencies and specialized ministries could share experiences from their contribution to service and witness. Structured discussions with, e.g., the agencies' leadership, could be facilitated, and the assembly decision-making sessions might decide to act on relevant issues put forward by specialized ministries.

#### *Youth / young adults*

37. There are great opportunities to strengthen the Christian faith of young people and deepen their engagement with the ecumenical movement through a WCC assembly. Their involvement and commitment enriches the churches and wider ecumenical fellowship. Specific efforts should be made to frame the assembly in contemporary and culturally relevant ways for young people, to facilitate their participation in all aspects of the assembly. Specific consultation with Echos, the WCC youth commission, youth-oriented ecumenical partners and younger members on the WCC central committee should be undertaken.

#### *Others invited to the assembly – Non-denominational movements*

38. Significant numbers of Christians in our global community, do not identify with a particular church denomination, but do seek to live out their faith in various Christian communities. Invitations for participation in the next assembly could be extended to Christian movements, networks, and communities that reflect a practical ecumenism. Member churches can make recommendations for such invitations. It is hoped that this will lead to both mutual learning and new opportunities for fellowship in the broader ecumenical landscape.

#### *Others invited to the assembly – Representatives of other faith communities*

39. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation is an ongoing programme of the WCC. Representatives of other faith communities have long been invited as guests to WCC assemblies. More than ever, great care should be taken to continue this practice.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the words of St Paul to the Romans, "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15.7), and reaffirming that all dimensions of the next assembly should be nourished by its spiritual life through prayer and Bible study, where all participants gather under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the assembly discernment committee strongly recommends the following:

1. The next WCC assembly should be open and more inviting to increase participation and interaction with the wider ecumenical movement.
2. The next WCC assembly should focus on relationships, among member churches and with ecumenical partners, and specifically on relationships between its constitutive components on the basis of the ethos of fellowship and consensus.
3. The WCC should continue to be open to dialogue with the Christian world communions reflecting on the possibilities of more coherence and common global gatherings or assemblies.
4. Assembly plenaries should involve ecumenical partners. Invitations should be sent to CWCs, REOs, NCCs, specialized ministries and other ecumenical partners so that their voices are heard and their contributions to the ecumenical movement are more visible.
5. The assembly planning committee is urged to give ample attention to the intended and planned interaction and to develop bridges between the different assembly components, including:
  - a. Separate days ought to be allocated specifically to the “marketplace” life of the assembly, so that delegates may participate fully to be enriched and informed by them.
  - b. Further consideration should be given to the creation of group encounters that promote significant exchanges between delegates and other participants. The size of such groups should be consonant with the aim of the encounter.
6. The composition of the assembly planning committee should take into account both confessional and regional balances and also ensure the inclusion of representatives of youth organizations, specialized ministries, Christian world communions and other ecumenical partners.
7. Distinguishing between the governance aspects and the other components of the assembly is essential to ensure greater levels of participation and interaction.
8. The significance of the ethos of fellowship and consensus requires intentional, substantive training of assembly leadership (moderators, rapporteurs, recorders).
9. Clear separation between elections/nominations process and the life of the assembly should be considered.
10. The assembly planning committee is expected to consult with the permanent committee on consensus and collaboration in planning the next assembly.

These are the common hopes of the ADC offered to the central committee in response to the mandate that was received.