

Document No 3

For Discussion

AN EXPANDED ASSEMBLY – A SECOND REPORT FOR ONGOING DISCUSSION

1. Introduction

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 will be taken on the type of assembly to be held in 2013 by the central committee when it meets in February 2008.

To date, the listening process has involved the executive committee, member churches and ecumenical partners, primarily Christian world communions.

This is the second opportunity for discussion with the executive committee. The listening process will continue. Both the Global Christian Forum (Nairobi, November 2007) and the meeting of the Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century (Geneva, November 2007) are key opportunities to continue reflecting on the potential value of an “expanded assembly”.

A third discussion paper, taking into account the fruits of this and future discussions, will be prepared for review by the officers in December of this year.

2. Listening to governing bodies

The executive committee, meeting in February 2007, reviewed an initial discussion paper (Document No 8). The executive committee raised concern about the term “ecumenical assembly” and felt that an exclusive focus on the participation of Christian world communions may not adequately represent the wider ecumenical family.

The executive committee requested that full WCC constituency, including member churches, associate councils, Christian world communions, international ecumenical organisations and specialized ministries, be asked for feedback on the “feasibility of a WCC assembly that would gather all churches and offer expanded space to partner ecumenical organisations” (see attached).

The response to the letter initiated by the executive committee has been limited, with only twelve churches/partners offering written feedback (see attached). Recognizing the generally low rate of response to such requests and the short deadline, more dynamic ways of garnering feedback were also employed.

3. Listening to member churches

The member churches have been engaged through the written request for feedback and also through the meeting of the Ecumenical Officers Network in May 2007.

The churches that did respond all felt that it was important to pursue an “expanded assembly”. They affirmed that the vision put forth in the letter was adequate, reflecting their own ecumenical vocation. The number of world, regional and confessional assemblies was critiqued by some as a financial burden, but was also critiqued for the multiplicity of unrelated processes of preparation and follow-up (lack of coherence reflecting ecumenical fragmentation). Concern was expressed on ensuring 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 partner ecumenical organisations would be encouraged in preparing an expanded assembly was highlighted by many respondents.

When discussing the letter that was sent in April requesting feedback on the next assembly, the ecumenical officers network, which represents over 50 member churches around the world, raised similar issues and concerns. The principle concern raised by this group 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. They asked for more clarification on the differences between the Global Christian Forum and an expanded assembly. They were concerned about the logistical complications in organizing an event with multiple partners, having potentially different or conflicting needs and expectations.

4. Listening to ecumenical partners

The only feedback from ecumenical partners has been from Christian world communions. A few communions responded in writing. The April letter requesting feedback on the next assembly was discussed significantly at the inaugural meeting of the Joint Consultative Commission between the WCC and Christian world communions (JCC), which met in May 2007.

When reflecting on the Porto Alegre assembly, all communion representatives present at the JCC meeting agreed that more time to meet as participants from the same church family would have been welcome.

The integral relationship between the Porto Alegre vision of an “ecumenical assembly”, continuing dialogue on “ecumenism in the 21st century” and the Global Christian Forum was mentioned by many. Discussion drew attention to the continued potential for confusion based on the variety of models previously discussed, i.e. joint, common, ecumenical and now an expanded WCC assembly.

Some JCC members expressed concern that the Porto Alegre vision of an “ecumenical assembly” should not be limited exclusively to the next WCC assembly as put forward in the April letter requesting feedback. Other participants considered it necessary for the WCC to retain ownership of such an assembly as a WCC event, not so as to pursue institutional interests, but to nurture the ecumenical movement.

Some commission members 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.

Reflecting ecclesial variety and relative forms of polity, there was varied feedback from each communion representative present at the JCC as to how such an expanded space could be used by their respective communions. There was stronger support from Lutherans and Reformed, each expressing interest in the possibility of using the same venue to conduct their respective business.

Both interest and hesitations were noted by Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and historic peace church participants.

The discussion affirmed the following:

- Need to define, the nature, style, participation and theological grounding of such an event.
- Need to attend equally to the desire to both deepen and expand existing ecumenical relationships through such an event, which was seen as somewhat non-compatible, e.g. an expanded WCC assembly might seem more inclusive, but poses the risk to become exclusive – either of communions that do not take advantage of expanded space or of churches that would not attend a WCC-sponsored event.
- Need to establish criteria for such an event, i.e.:
 - 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.
- Need to continue creative dialogue on the possible formats that would allow different communions to take advantage of expanded space. This discussion brought to the table new ideas about Anglican participation (Anglican Communion Congress in 2013); historic peace church participation (bringing together Brethren, Friends and Mennonites for consultation); and mission trip opportunities (e.g. during time given to other church families for communion exclusive business).
- Strong desire of the JCC to be part of the planning process.
- Hesitations were noted about the varying forms of communion governance, competing formats, the manageability of such an event and the need to further resolve the operative vision of ‘common’ versus ‘expanded’ assembly.

5. Preliminary analysis

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 born 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 preparations toward the Global Christian Forum.

The Porto Alegre assembly confirmed that this approach should continue, but also brought renewed attention to the constitutional role of the WCC 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 participation of ecumenical partners in the life of the WCC are, in fact, two significant means to ensure the coherence of the ecumenical movement.

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 co-operation among ecumenical actors. It requires bringing into more dynamic dialogue the goals of deepening fellowship and broadening participation. In this way, the churches are encouraged in their active ecumenical vocation.

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.

In responding to the request for advice on the next WCC assembly, both the member churches and Christian world communions highlighted the desire for a more coherent ecumenical movement. In spite of reservations, the general support for an expanded assembly concerns the potential that such an event has to foster greater coherence of the one ecumenical movement.

In this regard, the way in which the next assembly is prepared, conducted and the manner in which follow-up is pursued has emerged as a key issue.

6. Emerging possibilities

The listening process has helped to identify a number of creative ideas, to refine some fundamental questions and to envision a concrete proposal as to how to proceed. The ideas, questions and proposals are tentative reflections for which feedback is now requested from the executive committee.

Some of the creative ideas to have emerged during the initial listening period, include:

- An “expanded assembly” is not necessarily limited in time and space, but could be developed as a process of ecumenical dialogue in which different assemblies, synods and conferences are encouraged to listen to and respond to one another.
- Can the WCC, Christian world communions and other partners agree to a limited number of common ecumenical themes around which to focus concerns and prayers in an attempt to develop more synergies and greater programmatic complementarity? If the themes for discussion are agreed three years in advance, can we foresee a co-ordinated process of responding to these themes ecumenically through different events?
- Can we not open the space that already exists within WCC assemblies for more confessional and regional discussions. For example, a full day of confessional discussions planned with the support of Christian world communions and a full day regional discussions planned with the support of regional and national associate councils.
- If an expanded assembly is able to offer space for common prayer and Bible study, a common space for discussion and common opportunities for celebration, can the infrastructure and planning process also be shared to allow ecumenical partners to stay on for two or more days in order to conduct their own business sessions, should they wish to do so?

In response to the vision of an assembly that offers expanded space to ecumenical partners the following fundamental questions have emerged:

- How can a WCC-led collaborative approach to preparing the next assembly facilitate a more coherent ecumenical movement?
- How can the assembly itself 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 co-operation?

In response to these questions, a concrete proposal has emerged that would both initiate preparations for the next assembly and continue to explore the potential such an event has to foster greater coherence of the one ecumenical movement.

The official representatives in an assembly include member church *delegates*, ecumenical partner *delegated representatives* and non-member church *delegated observers*. In the past, WCC assemblies were planned by committees representing member churches and did not significantly involve other constituent representatives. Is it possible to envision the appointment of a planning committee that includes representatives of member churches, Christian world communions, associate councils and other affiliated bodies?

7. Request to the Executive Committee

The executive committee is asked to discuss this document, to critique the content and, if agreeable, to refine and affirm the general direction as developed thus far.

The members of the executive committee who will participate in the Global Christian Forum and the Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century are invited to listen and to help interpret how those events/discussions might shed further light on the value of an expanded assembly.

The executive committee is asked to affirm the continuing process of listening and reflecting in preparation for formulating a proposal for consideration by the central committee.

8. Appendices

- April letter requesting feedback on the next assembly, which was sent to member churches, associate councils, Christian world communions, international ecumenical organizations and specialized ministries (separate page)
- List of church and ecumenical partners who responded to the April letter requesting feedback on the next assembly.
- Preliminary schedule of assembly preparations approved by the central committee in September 2006.

Responses from Member Churches 2007 re next Assembly

Name of the Church	Name	Title	City, Country	Date	Member Church	NCCs	REOs	CWCs
Eglise Protestante Unie de Belgique	Dr Guy Liagre	Président	Bruxelles, Belgium	May-07	yes			
Eglise Réformée de France	Rev Marcel Manoël	Président	Paris, France	Jul-07	yes			
Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland	Wilfried Neusel		Düsseldorf, Germany	May-07	yes			
Methodist Church in Ireland	Winston Graham		Ireland	May-07	yes			
Church of Norway	Sven Oppegaard for Olav	for Olav Fykse Tveit	Norway	May-07	yes			
Church of Sweden	Christofer Lundgren	Ecumenical Officer	Sweden	Jun-07	yes			
Anglican Communion Office	Robert B. Goodfellow	for C. Epting and K.Kearon	New York, U.S.A.	May-07	yes			
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	Clifton Kirkpatrick	Stated Clerk of the Gen.Assembly	Louisville, Ken. U.S.A.	Jun-07	yes			
The Reformed Ecumenical Council	Richard L. van Houten	General Secretary	Grand Rapids, MI, U.S.A.	Jun-07	CWCs			yes
United Reformed Church	Philip Woods	Secretary for Internat. Relations	London, United Kingdom	Jul-07	yes			
Evangelische Brüder-Unität, Bad Boll	Pfr Christoph Reichel		Bad Boll, Germany	Jul-07	yes			
World Alliance of Reformed Churches	Rev Dr Setri Nyomi	General Secretary	Geneva, Switzerland	Jul-07	CWCs			yes
The United Church of Christ in Japan	Rev. Nobuhisa Yamakita	Moderator	Tokyo, Japan	Aug-07	yes			
Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IELCB)	Rev. Dr. Walter Altmann	President	Porto Alegre, Brazil	Aug-07	yes			

From the 'Assembly Evaluation', document 03, received by the WCC Central Committee, September 2006

Schedule of preparations

The following draft schedule of preparations is based on the assumption that the 10th Assembly will be held in late 2013:

Central Committee meeting in February 2008

- Elaborate basic expectations for the 10th Assembly
- Appoint an Assembly Planning Committee
- Appoint an Assembly Worship Planning Committee
- Initiate venue search

Central Committee meeting in August 2009

- Decide on Assembly theme
- Decide on Assembly venue
- Confirm the Assembly budget
- Map the distribution of delegates

Central Committee meeting in February 2011

- Confirm the Assembly programme and draft agenda
- Issue invitations
- Launch congregational resources

Central Committee meeting in August 2012

- Confirm member church delegations
- Nominate additional delegates according to the 15% process
- Nominate Assembly leadership
- Launch Assembly study materials

If the Assembly is held in early 2013, all matters of action must be presented to the meeting of the Central Committee in February 2011.