

Document No. **11**

**FOR ACTION**

**Update on the Assembly Discernment Process**

What follows is an update on the assembly discernment process, with particular attention to establishing and preparing the work of the assembly discernment committee (ADC) as per the mandate given by the central committee when it met in February 2008 (cf. report of the policy reference committee and the report of the nominations committee).

**1. An update on ADC membership**

The Central Committee nominated the following members to serve on the committee:

- Metropolitan Gennadios of Sasima, Turkey, Orthodox (Eastern) – Moderator
- Bishop Youannes, Africa, Egypt, Orthodox (Oriental)
- Ms Iyabo Oyekola, Africa, Nigeria, African Instituted, youth
- Ms Alison Jane Preston, Asia, Australia, Anglican, youth
- Bishop Isaac Mar Philoxenos, Asia, India, Mar Thoma
- Rev. Dr Paul Gardner, Caribbean, Jamaica, Free (Moravian)
- Rev. Heike Bosien, Europe, Germany, Lutheran
- Rev. Dr Michael Tita, Europe, Romania, Orthodox (Eastern)
- Mr Graham McGeoch, Europe, United Kingdom, Reformed, youth
- Dr Nora Bayrakdarian-Kabakian, Middle East, Lebanon, Orthodox (Oriental)
- Rev. John Thomas, North America, USA, United
- Ms Anne Glynn Mackoul, North America, USA, Orthodox (Eastern)
- Dr Magali Nascimento Cunha, Latin America, Brazil, Methodist
- Miss Geraldine Varea, Pacific, Fiji, Methodist, youth

The central committee requested the general secretary to invite nominations from Christian world communions (CWC), national councils of churches (NCC), regional ecumenical organizations (REO), specialized ministries (SM), international ecumenical organizations (IEO), the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), Pentecostal churches and the Global Christian Forum (GCF). The following nominations were received as of 1 September:

- CWC – Rev. Canon Gregory Cameron, Anglican Communion
- CWC – Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, Lutheran World Federation
- CWC – Rev. Dr Douwe Visser, World Alliance of Reformed Churches (observer)
- REO – Metr. George Saliba, Middle East Council of Churches
- NCC – Dr Peter Bouteneff, National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA
- NCC – Rev. Dr Vuyani Vellem, South African Council of Churches
- SM – Rev. Jorge Domingues, General Board of Global Ministries – United Methodist Church
- SM – Mrs Kirsten Lund Larsen, DanChurchAid
- IEO – Ms Necta Montes Rocas, World Student Christian Federation (WSCF)

- RCC – Dr Fr Gosbert Byamanungu, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity
- RCC – Sister Monica Joseph, Congregation of Gesu-Maria
- GCF – Rev. Dr Wonsuk Ma, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

The following nominations of representatives are pending as of 1 September:

- REO – Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI)
- IEO – Syndesmos
- Pentecostal churches
- CWC – Baptist World Alliance (observers)

The process of securing nominations from ecumenical partners was facilitated by opportunities to consult with the general secretaries of REOs at their gathering in April, the conference of secretaries of CWCs at their steering committee meeting in May and the WCC round table core group at their meeting in May.

Further feedback was sought from the WCC Officers during their meeting in May. The officers accepted the friendly request of the CWCs to nominate two members and two observers. The CWCs cited their various levels of interest and mandates in pursuing this discussion with the WCC as the reason to request additional presence. The WCC officers also accepted a proposal to solicit nominations from specific REOs and NCCs and to solicit IEO nominations from Syndesmos and the WSCF.

## **2. An update on preparations**

The ADC is expected to report to the central committee in September 2009. The envisioned timeline for its work is as follows:

November 2008	First meeting of the ADC in Geneva (4-7 November)
December 2008	Report on the first meeting to be shared with the WCC officers
February 2009	Report to the executive committee for discussion and feedback to the ADC
April 2009	Second meeting of the ADC to produce a second report
May 2009	Second report to be shared with the WCC Officers
July 2009	Report to be finalized
September 2009	Final report to the executive committee for presentation to the central committee

Preparations for the work of the ADC are being developed under the leadership of Metropolitan Gennadios, ADC moderator, and with the support of a mixed staff group.

The first ADC meeting on 4 to 7 November will be held at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva. The registration process was launched in August. The first meeting will seek to respond to the concerns that have been raised by member churches and ecumenical partners in the listening process. It will begin to explore the feasibility of providing expanded space for Christian world communions (CWCs) and of fostering the participation of other ecumenical partners, church groups and non-member churches in the service of Christian unity and common witness to the world. Clarity is needed how the next WCC assembly might provide ample space to contribute to 1) deepening the fellowship of WCC member churches, 2) broadening participation in the fellowship of WCC member churches and 3) maintaining the coherence of the one ecumenical movement.

### **3. An update on the ongoing listening process**

The central committee also requested that the process of listening to member churches should continue. The permanent committee on collaboration and consensus, when it met in June, reiterated the need to solicit more feedback from member churches.

The general secretary wrote to all central committee members asking them to assist in securing feedback from their respective member churches. Responses have begun to arrive although not in significant numbers. Does a lack of response suggest that the call for an expanded space at the next WCC assembly reflects more of an institutional agenda and is not so much a vital concern for member churches or that the still existing un-clarity regarding the purpose and character of expanded space makes it difficult to engage with the issue?

Among the primary concerns raised by WCC member churches is the need to ensure the integrity of the next WCC assembly as a unique gathering of member churches in prayerful deliberation according to the ethos of fellowship and consensus.

### **4. Need for clarity**

The Common Understanding and Vision process identified three essential dimensions of service to Christian unity and common witness by the member churches of the WCC:

- deepening of the fellowship of member churches,
- broadening participation in the ecumenical movement and
- maintaining the coherence among ecumenical partners

These dimensions express the unique role of the WCC as a fellowship of churches in their pursuit of visible unity and a common witness not only among themselves but in partnership with other actors in the ecumenical movement. These three dimensions are inter-related and need to be held together in a constructive relationship.

The report of the policy reference committee of the 2008 central committee states:

The PRC devoted significant time to discussion on proposals for the next assembly in 2013, aware of the need for greater clarity of how the three dimensions of deepening of the fellowship of churches, the broadening participation in the ecumenical movement and ensuring greater coherence among ecumenical partners can be held in constructive relationship, whilst maintaining the ethos of fellowship and consensus.

The report continues:

The PRC underlines the importance of the distinction of the vision of an "expanded assembly" on the one hand, and steps towards "an expanded space" on the other hand. The term "expanded space", however, is understood in different ways. Some emphasize its role for the broadening of participation, others for ensuring greater coherence, still others understand its role in deepening existing relationships among the member churches. These different perspectives need to remain clear, but also inter-related, hence the need for a discernment committee.

The report points to the different ways in which language is used and understood. The same differences surfaced in the "listening process" initiated by the central committee seeking reactions to the 2006 assembly recommendations concerning the next WCC assembly.

Alongside common prayer, Bible study, plenary sessions, committee work and decision making sessions, WCC assemblies have always included times for regional and confessional meetings. Assemblies have always welcomed ecumenical partners and visitors. More recent assemblies offered more intentionally structured participation in the form of “padares” (1998) and “mutirão” workshops (2006).

What is the purpose to provide expanded space beyond these elements of recent assemblies? The “listening process” that was initiated after the assembly revealed that expectations among member churches differ:

Focusing on the deepening of the fellowship, many want to build on and further develop the fruits of 60 year’s of the pursuit of Christian unity and a common witness to the world by the member churches through their council. They highlight the relationships of mutual accountability in this fellowship and emphasize the value of recent achievements, i.e. the introduction of consensus procedures as expression of an underlying ethos of consensus. Expanded space could be used for deeper theological and spiritual encounter concerning the search for unity and common witness by representatives of member churches both within and between different Christian traditions. For others, this would not give sufficient recognition to the diversity of organizational expressions of the ecumenical movement and the need to foster their co-operation and shared sense of purpose and vision. While they underline the need to broaden and strengthen participation among member churches and ecumenical partners, they also recognize that there is the need to deepen these relationships in the ethos of fellowship and consensus.

Emphasizing the broadening of participation, some think of churches that are not members of the WCC, especially Pentecostal and charismatic churches. This family of churches has, for many reasons, stayed outside of the ecumenical movement. But new relationships are developing. Like the world mission conference in Athens, the assembly could become a place for mutual encounter. Others ask in view of such a proposal what the difference would be between expanded space at the assembly and the Global Christian Forum (GCF), which provides a broad platform for churches from all different Christian traditions. The GCF is the broadest platform on which Christian churches have met so far. While it is an instrument to broaden participation, it does not address the two other dimensions.

The broadening of participation and greater inclusiveness are also motivations for some to think of a kind of global “Kirchentag” that would precede the WCC assembly as a gathering of churches, ecumenical partners, and groups that identify with the ecumenical movement. Such a gathering would demonstrate the vitality of the wider ecumenical movement and help the assembly to address relevant contemporary concerns. Again others are warning that an event of such a wide scope could undermine the identity of the WCC as a fellowship of churches, would not establish the level of mutual accountability that is essential for the fellowship, and could be counterproductive to focusing the mandate and agenda of the WCC.

Those putting the emphasis on greater coherence of the ecumenical movement, want to foster co-operation and synergies between different ecumenical organizations and the WCC, especially with Christian world communions, but also with regional ecumenical organizations and others. Some ask if the Faith and Order Forum on Bilateral dialogues can serve as an instructive example for structuring the relationship between bi-lateral and multi-lateral and thus also between confessional and conciliar ecumenism? When the question is raised if expanded space can also offer opportunities for decision making of those bodies in the context of the next WCC assembly, many others are concerned that this could jeopardize the integrity of the decision making process of both WCC and these other organizations.

Two concerns have been very clearly articulated:

1. The importance not to confuse the decision making processes of different bodies. This was articulated by the by the central committee in 2008 in the PRC report asking the ADC:

to maintain a clear distinction between the governance aspects of the assembly on the one hand, primarily for the WCC but also for the CWCs and confessional families should they choose to use the "expanded space" provided in the assembly for their own governance purposes, and the celebratory and encounter elements of the assembly on the other hand.

2. The urgent plea not to jeopardize the fruits of the special commission on Orthodox participation in the WCC – even when following the ethos of consensus – and not to marginalize the representation of Orthodox churches in moving towards an expanded space.

Given these concerns, clarity is needed if it is feasible to provide expanded space at the next assembly. How do the different expectations and goals relate to each other? Are they mutually exclusive or can at least some of them not only be compatible with each other, but mutually supportive? Can they be seen as different steps in a process that has even some analogy with the liturgy?

It was the vision of the WCC when it was founded 60 years ago not only to unite the member churches in one fellowship, but also to bring together the Faith and Order and the Life and Work movements, and later International Missionary Council, into one ecumenical movement. It has been a major achievement of the WCC to hold these movements and the churches together.

With new actors in the ecumenical movement, new churches seeking visible unity and new contextual challenges, the role of the WCC vis a vis the wider ecumenical movement calls for similar efforts to foster a constructive relationship between deepening the fellowship of mutually committed churches, broadening participation and maintaining coherence among those who are actively involved in the one ecumenical movement.

## **5. Action by the Executive Committee**

The executive committee is asked:

- a) to receive the update on ADC membership, preparations and listening process, and
- b) to give further advice on how best to approach the task of the ADC and to interpret the term 'expanded space' in view of the role and function of the WCC for the member churches and the wider ecumenical movement.