

Third Consultation on Forum Proposal

Pasadena, 15 – 20 June 2002

A narrative and interpretive record

From 15 –20 June 2002 the third consultation on the proposal of a Global Christian Forum took place at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, USA. The meeting brought together 59 participants from Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Holiness and African Instituted churches and from international Christian organisations. It was possibly the first time that such a broadly representative group of all the main traditions of Christianity today in the world met to discuss the Forum proposal. Participants came from Africa, Asia, Australia, Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North America.

The invitations for this consultation were addressed to churches and organisations, not to individuals. While the nature of representation was not the same for each participant, all who were present came with a sense of being delegated by their constituency and accountable to it.

The consultation was convened by the 'Continuation Committee', a group of seven persons which was formed at the first consultation on the Forum proposal in 1998¹. The group acted as steering committee during the meeting.

The programme of the consultation was conceived in a way that would provide as much space as possible for the participants to develop the agenda together. In broad lines the flow was:

- why are we here (opening presentations);
- who are we who are assembled around this table (participants introducing themselves, comments, expectations, fears, hopes)
- what are the issues we bring to this table (work in small groups and sharing in plenary);
- how do we look at some of these issues (panels and plenary discussion);
- can we be together and move together?

The consultation opened and closed with a worship service. Each day began with a morning worship according to one of the traditions represented in the meeting, and concluded with a moment of prayer.

why this consultation?

In the opening presentation on "*The Conversation So Far*" members of the Continuation Committee recalled the purpose of the proposed Forum and the process since the first consultation, which took place at the initiative of the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. The exploration of the Forum proposal evolved autonomously under the responsibility of the Continuation Committee, while the WCC continued to provide secretarial support. The committee invited a number of Evangelicals and Pentecostals to a meeting to 'test' the idea of a Forum with them (September 2000) and, encouraged by the outcome, resolved to organise this third consultation as the next step in the process. It had no pre-conceived ideas as to what should be achieved, except the hope that the participants would engage each other in a meaningful discussion. The committee was aware that there were mixed feelings about the Forum proposal. Within the WCC some feared that it would weaken ecumenical commitment. Some were opposed

¹ See "Review and Update on the Forum Proposal", February 2001

to any conversation that would include participation by the WCC. Some Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and organisations declined the invitation to this consultation.

This frank opening presentation led to an equally frank exchange of views about the invitations to this consultation, the relation of the Forum proposal to the WCC, the position of the Catholic Church and the need for new paradigms and new configurations of relating to one another. Two examples of processes similar to the Forum proposal were mentioned, in the USA and in India.

The consultation took place under the theme "*Strengthening the Fellowship We Share – Maintain the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace*". Dr Howard Loewen, Dean of Fuller Theological Seminary, gave the keynote address in which he focussed in a thought-provoking way on the centrality of the issue of scripture and tradition for the future of dialogue and cooperation between the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Anglican traditions on the one hand, and the Evangelicals and Pentecostals on the other hand.

who are assembled here?

The self-introductions of the participants turned out to be a fascinating exposure of the diversity of Christian traditions and faith journeys that were assembled around the table. While there were reasons to be somewhat apprehensive of an exercise of this kind with close to sixty people – it took a full day plus the first session of the next – all agreed how valuable it was and how much this was at the heart of the Forum idea. It was an experience of listening to our various, and at times very different ways of speaking about faith and church, an experience of learning and of mutual discovery. It was something new for most participants coming from the older churches and ecumenical organisations, and it helped to place everybody on a more equal footing.

This sharing was typically something that cannot be reflected adequately in a written report. Yet a few things can be mentioned: the support expressed by many for this coming together and for broadening the table, the concern about proselytism mentioned in particular by the Orthodox, the ways in which in many local situations walls are being broken down and new relationships are growing, but also sometimes new divisions develop.

what are the issues?

The round of introductions was followed by work in small groups, around three questions: 1) what are the issues, 2) how to address these issues, and 3) what commitments. In the reporting several common issues emerged:

- language: we need to clarify and develop a common understanding of words we use, e.g. ecumenical, evangelical etc;
- ignorance, fear and suspicion: with whom do we associate, what is the agenda of the other, fear of change;
- proselytism, evangelism, pastoral care, nominalism, religious freedom;
- respect, mutual recognition and mutual acceptance;
- hermeneutics: the interpretation of scripture, the role of tradition;
- dissemination and reception of the results of bilateral dialogues.

There was also considerable communality regarding ways to address these and other issues: praying together, creating space open to all, pursuing sharing and dialogue rather than seeking to reach agreement, allowing for time so that trust can grow, engaging together in areas where cooperation is possible, e.g. 'social issues', fostering "Forum-type" opportunities in local and regional settings, affirming what is happening already. In order to achieve such cooperation, the groups pointed to commitments such as: reporting back to the constituencies, engaging the

churches and organisations to send representatives to "Forum meetings" over an extended period of time, shared responsibility for the Forum process, strengthening and broadening the inclusivity, involving Christian student movements, strengthening and supporting the Continuation Committee, setting up sub-committees of the continuation committee in regions, planning of global gatherings as the conclusion of local, national and regional gatherings, focussing on specific issues, holding the next global meeting in the South.

The work of the groups could be summarized in the concluding sentence of one of the reports: "What we are doing here has value and we need to go on doing it".

In the plenary discussion following the reporting from the groups, a comment was made that not much had been said about the theological grounding of the Forum idea. There were also suggestions to agree on a name to identify "Forum-type" events in various settings. Questions were raised about staffing and funding and the need to strengthen the organisational base. This discussion was left without conclusion at this point, because many felt that it was too early to deal with these considerations.

how do those assembled here look at the issues?

The reflection on two major issues was deepened through two panel presentations on: 1) evangelization, and 2) inter-church relations. The two panels were formed by participants from the various traditions who were given some time to prepare themselves as groups. The panel on evangelization brought out the following views:

Catholic. The Catholic Church has a long and rich tradition of evangelization. While it was sometimes marked by coercion and violence, it also included outstanding examples of efforts to truly inculturate the gospel. Evangelization has moved to the centre since Vatican II. Social justice is an intrinsic part of the proclamation of the gospel. The missionary experience has had an impact on doctrine. God's truth is also reflected in other religions. Those outside the church can also be saved. Inter-religious dialogue is part of evangelization.

Orthodox (Eastern). Evangelization understood as engaging in partnership with worshipping communities. In orthodox countries most people are baptized. Our churches could benefit from the help of other Christians, e.g. in religious education. Religious freedom means that they are free to come and help the local church. In Orthodoxy, worship is a way of evangelization: the visual message of the icons, the incense, the saints, and above all, the Holy Communion. The entire person is involved. Through worship the church has survived persecution and suffering.

Pentecostal. In Pentecostalism it is the personal faith experience in Jesus Christ which leads to the right belief and the right practice. The life of the individual is transformed for the purpose of discipleship. The change brought by the transforming power of the gospel goes from the individual to the family and from the family to the community. It results in more justice and less poverty. This understanding of evangelization carries the danger of individualizing the faith.

Evangelical – Africa. "The faith is a mile wide and an inch deep". Evangelization is a process, not a one-time event. Faith must be deepened so that the transformation of lives has an impact. Our theology is still very western. Para-church organisations working with students are the evangelistic arm of the church, yet have to fight for a place to stand.

Evangelical – India. Indianisation of the Christian faith is not an option but a must. We cannot say to people of other faiths: we have the gospel, you are lost. The conquering, military language

of evangelization cannot work in India. Even the word 'conversion' is problematic. We speak of 'transformation' or 'encountering Christ'. A Sikh convert has said: "Give the water of life (i.e. the gospel) in an Indian cup".

Evangelical – Lausanne movement. Rom. 10:8-15. The good news is the righteousness of God and the confession that Jesus is Lord. That good news brings transformation. It must be proclaimed by those who are sent. Jesus was the sent one who sent out the disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are being sent – both the church and the individual. Taking the whole gospel to the whole world is the task of the whole church.

In the ensuing discussion it was noted that the panelists did not comment on cooperation in evangelization. We need to learn from each other, which requires attitudes of acceptance, tolerance and humility. Evangelizing groups sometimes encounter hostility from fellow Christians. The language we use can be a barrier. Words like evangelization and crusade can have different meanings in different contexts. The concept of 'territory' is important for the Orthodox, while Evangelicals and Pentecostals go by the Great Commission which in their understanding has no borders. Our understanding of evangelization can be informed by others, e.g. Catholics have learned much from Evangelicals. Yet for Catholics and many others the evangelical concept is too narrow, too exclusively focused on the salvation of the individual. The older Pentecostal churches in Latin America have also a broader view, holding together conversion of the individual and transformation of the society. The link between evangelization and socio-economic justice must not be lost. Sometimes the ones who evangelize are the same who maintain the unjust structures.

The panel on inter-church relations followed a similar pattern of presenting viewpoints from various traditions. The panelists were asked to point to 'barriers and breakthroughs':

Orthodox (Oriental). The Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches have much in common but are not in full communion. The separation goes back to the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In recent years the theological dialogue has reached a breakthrough with the agreements on christology. To restore eucharistic communion these agreements have to be approved by the Holy Synods, which is a long and slow process. The barriers are historical and practical (the Orthodox churches do not have a world confessional body). The official dialogue with the Catholic Church has also led to agreement on christology. A barrier in this relationship is the existence of the 'uniate' churches (churches of the Oriental rite in communion with Rome). In the bilateral dialogues with the Anglicans, the Lutherans and the Reformed, the problems are more on moral issues than with doctrine. The Orthodox churches are committed to the multilateral ecumenical organisations (e.g. the WCC) which have helped them to widen their relationships. The barriers are their minority position in these bodies and the western style of working. One of the main obstacles in relations of Orthodox with other churches is proselytism.

African Instituted Churches. These are churches founded, administered and propagated by Africans. They represent one third of African Christians and are growing fast. They practice healing, fasting and prophecy. The mission-founded churches reject the AICs because of their popularity, rituals and growth. Some recent breakthroughs in relations with other churches are:

- Some AICs have joined the WCC and the All Africa Conference of Churches;
- Some have become member of the national council of churches in their country;
- The foundation of the Organisation of African Instituted Churches in 1978;
- The creation of the Good News Seminary in Accra (Ghana) with the help of the Mennonites and Lutherans;

- The dialogue between the OAIC and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Lutheran. Major breakthroughs in the relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with other churches are the 'full communion' agreements with the Episcopal Church, three Reformed churches and the Moravian Church. Full communion implies sharing the sacraments, exchange of ministers, recognition of baptism and common decision making where appropriate. The barriers which still exist are sexism, racism, abuse of power, and the slow reception process of the agreements. To get these into the life of the congregations takes a long time.

Catholic. The Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council was the watershed which opened the way for numerous bilateral dialogues and for the cooperation in the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC. Central to all dialogues is the healing of memories and reconciliation. Dialogue is not simply a conversation but seeking the truth of the Apostolic Faith. It asks for conversion and new understanding of one another. Some breakthroughs are 'mild': changed attitudes, acceptance of each other, more clarity on that what still divides. Other breakthroughs are historic, e.g. the Joint Declaration on Justification with the Lutherans. Catholics and Lutherans are now inviting the Reformed and the Methodist to join. Other examples are Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM), and the christological agreement with the Oriental Orthodox. Barriers are the lack of ecumenical formation, the stereotypes and the temptation not to take dialogue seriously enough.

Pentecostal. No Pentecostal can claim to speak on behalf of all. Ecumenism is new for Pentecostals. There are many barriers: ignorance of other traditions, fear to lose identity, fear that others will set and control the agenda, and also lack of invitation: Pentecostals are not asked to come to the table. Another obstacle is that Pentecostal theology is in its origin and early development primarily an oral tradition. The dialogue with the Catholics has been a breakthrough. In some cases the local context has made it possible to break through these barriers, e.g. the struggle against apartheid in South Africa which brought Christians together at funerals, and for prayer services.

Evangelical. Inter-church dialogue presupposes that there is a 'middle-ground' for encounter where discussion can take place on doctrinal differences. The aim is to build trust at the level of church structures. The victims of oppression, the people who are on the 'underside' are not part of this dialogue. They are not included. Yet we all know the biblical option for the marginalized. We do not hear enough in this meeting about the world context of injustice and suffering. In the Latin American situation the breakthrough comes from the oppressed. Catholics and Evangelicals find each other and pray together in the base communities. The main barrier is church politics and power.

Several important points were raised in the discussion which followed the panel presentations. For instance, the emphasis on theological dialogues would seem to imply that this is the most important form of inter-church relations. Yet there are many other ways in which churches can relate to each other, e.g. social action or common witness. More barriers to dialogue were mentioned: the question of representation, i.e. who sits at the table, the difficulty of Evangelicals and Pentecostals to engage their churches, the new divisions within some churches caused by moral and ethical issues, the differing views on scripture and tradition. It was suggested that full communion was a rather painless form of ecumenism because it required no sacrifice. Each church could preserve its identity. Those involved in such agreements objected that full communion was on the contrary a demanding process affecting the whole life of the church and often causing internal strife. Examples were also given of prolonged efforts to come to organic unity, sometimes ending in failure and yet new beginnings were made by these same churches

(e.g. the Local Ecumenical Partnerships in the UK). Successful church unions were sometimes reached at the cost of whole congregations leaving in disagreement.

Some discussion took place on the impact – or the lack thereof – of inter-church dialogues on the people in the pew. The reports are available and published, sometimes in more than one language but do not reach the faithful. Even clergy, teachers of theology and church leaders are ill-informed. The example was given of the Catholic – Pentecostal dialogue which has been going on for twenty-five years and is still unknown in large sectors of the Catholic Church and the Pentecostal churches.

The question of proselytism surfaced again. Proselytism is not only a problem in the relations between ‘mainline’ churches and Evangelicals or Pentecostals; it also occurs between churches of the same tradition. It often reflects a total lack of trust that “the other” has the same commitment to Jesus Christ, and an absolute ignorance of our respective histories. This is true for Evangelicals and Pentecostals who are driven by evangelistic zeal and do not try to understand and listen, but also for ‘mainline’ churches who make no effort to know Pentecostalism from within. The discussion on proselytism must take place between the parties which accuse each other, e.g. the Orthodox and the Pentecostals, rather than in the arena of the ecumenical organisations such as the WCC where the Pentecostals are largely absent. As an illustration of a good piece of work on the issue, copies of the Report from the fourth phase of the Catholic – Pentecostal dialogue on *Evangelism, Proselytism and Common Witness* were distributed.

where to go from here?

For the final phase of the meeting the steering committee proposed to the participants to focus the discussion on 1) a brief report or communique, 2) a possible “statement of purpose” of the Forum, 3) a recomposition or expansion of the Continuation Committee, and 4) questions of financial and staff support for the Forum process. Some participants expressed concern about speaking publicly, indicating that they had accepted the invitation provided that they would not be asked to associate themselves with a public report or statement. Others felt on the contrary that a communique would help them in reporting back to their church or organisation. In order to respect the integrity of all it was agreed that no names would be mentioned and no list of participants published with the communique and the purpose statement.

Four groups were formed according to interest, to work on the four items. The drafts of the communique and the purpose statement were very carefully discussed in plenary, reviewed by the groups, and eventually adopted after a further round of plenary discussion (see Appendices 1 and 2). The group which considered the matter of the Continuation Committee recommended that its composition should in future better reflect balances of region (i.e. the South), gender, church families (or Christian traditions) and networking organisations (i.e. ecumenical and para-church bodies). As a first step, it was proposed to expand the existing committee with four members from among the participants in this consultation, who should all be from the South, from Evangelical and Pentecostal constituences and of whom at least one should be a woman. The existing committee was asked to approach individuals. Before the conclusion of the consultation four persons had accepted in principle, pending consultation with their church or organisation². There was general affirmation that the character of the Continuation Committee should remain provisional, and that for the time being no attempt should be made to make it fully representative of all the potentially participating bodies in the Forum process. There was also agreement that at

² At the time of publishing this summary all four had confirmed their participation.

an appropriate time the World Evangelical Alliance, as the most representative global evangelical organisation, should be invited to appoint a member to the Continuation Committee.

With regard to financial and staff support there was appreciation for the role of the World Council of Churches. It was suggested that the objective for the future should be to arrive at a balanced support from ecumenical and evangelical bodies³. The WCC and the WEA were mentioned as possible 'parent' organisations.

some concluding comments

Two important considerations can be drawn from this consultation, which are reflected in the provisional *Purpose Statement* and the communique *Towards a Global Christian Forum*:

- a clear – and joyful – affirmation of the vision of a Forum bringing around the table Christians from all the major traditions for prayer, dialogue and mutual engagement;
- an understanding of the Forum as an unfolding *process* rather than an 'event' to be reached at some point in the future.

The nature of the consultation was such that no formal proposals or recommendations were submitted for discussion and approval. There were a number of suggestions which are on record, e.g. to plan a series of Forum meetings over a period of five to ten years, to focus these meetings around major issues of concern to all Christian churches and organisations, to hold a next meeting in the South, to explore the possibilities of Forum-type processes regionally and nationally, etc. Participants also proposed that other churches and organisations which were not yet at the table should be invited to join, and that care should be taken to continue enlarging the circle of those involved.

The consultation entrusted the wealth of its discussions, shared experiences, prayer, ideas and commitment to the Continuation Committee and concluded with thanksgiving to God and trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit into the future.

September 2002

Hubert van Beek
 Secretary of the Continuation Committee
 Tel. +41 22 791 6202 or 755 4546
 Fax +41 22 788 0067
 Email hvb@wcc-coe.org or hvb@infomaniak.ch

³ Some concrete suggestions were made to seek funding from evangelical sources, which will be pursued by the Continuation Committee.