

Developing the Ecumenical Vision in the 21st Century

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Dear sisters and brothers, it is indeed an honour and an inspiration for me to be invited to the metropolis of London, to the fellowship of churches in Britain and Ireland and to one of the regions of motherhood for the modern ecumenical movement.

I come to you from Geneva, from the Ecumenical Centre, from the community of staff colleagues and meeting place for the fellowship of churches in the WCC. The 349 member churches, amongst them many of your churches, are committed to this legacy of mutually accountable ecumenism for the visible unity of the church and for the common witness and ministry in the world. Particularly, in times of challenges and divisions – we have to be mindful of one calling and the thickness of the legacy and the institution we represent, a thickness of mature discussions and collective voices in solidarity.

But I am not only coming to you from Geneva. I am also coming to you as a Norwegian Lutheran. In the inspiring, but demanding discussions on how the Church of Norway should or could relate both to the fellowship with Anglican churches in Britain and Ireland through the Porvoo document, as well as to the Protestant/Reformed churches in Europe – including the Church of Scotland, one of the most important remarks came from a theologian and hymn-writer: If we can have church fellowship with the Englishmen, we can and should have it with the Scots! The comment does not sound very theological, however, it expresses that ecumenical relations are real human relations first of all – or, theologically speaking, expressing the oneness of creation and the call to proper relationship with every neighbour. The comment also shows that we believe that your confessional differences also have to do with your history, your national identity – and that you are a wide fellowship of churches here in Britain and in Ireland. You know a lot about the blessings and the challenges of being churches of peoples with different national identities. Let me also remind you that I come from visits to many member churches around the world that have strong links to many of your historical churches through mission. I have seen many fruits of your church life; I have seen how relations have grown from the times of colonialism to the time of freedom. In Samoa, Kenya, Jamaica, Pakistan and other places, your identity as fellowship of churches is forever related to many churches around the globe.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:19.20)

The ecumenical vision

Developing the Ecumenical Vision in the 21st Century - I accepted the invitation and the theme for this lecture with great pleasure and expectations for a meaningful discussion and interaction with you. I like that the theme refers to *the* ecumenical vision with the definite article. It suggests that we basically know what the ecumenical vision entails and means to us. I believe, this is not only how it should be, but that it is really true: Who would not refer to the

high priestly prayer of Jesus concluding the discourse in the upper room in chapter 17 of the Gospel according to John: "...that they all may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21)? Who would deny that the commitment to the unity of those following Jesus is a Gospel imperative that reflects the *perichoresis*, the loving relationship within the Holy Trinity? The key word in the text is the small one "as" – "for just as". Who would not recognize that from the council at Jerusalem in Acts 15 until today it has been the task of leaders of the church to foster reconciliation and unity of all believers beyond the boundaries that separate humankind? There will always be differences and thus probably potential divisions in the fellowship of the Church. Therefore, the great theological question in the New Testament is how can we be one in Jesus Christ when we are so different?

Ina pantes hen osin – we see these Greek words of John 17:21 every day written on the tapestry covering the wall of our conference hall in Geneva. The tapestry shows the diversity of the churches worldwide that are united by their faith in the crucified and risen Christ. The churches live their faith in the context of different cultures and religions and within the wider horizon of God's creation. *Oikoumene* understood as God's household of life always points to this wide horizon and the eschatological expectation of God's reign to come (Col 1.15 ff, Rom 8:18 ff.). I am convinced that with John 17:21, Ephesians 1:10, Colossians 1:15ff. and many other Biblical references, the ecumenical vision has a clear and strong Biblical basis that both motivates and challenges us to be one under all changing circumstances. This foundation of the unity that is given in Christ is confirmed by the first ecumenical councils and is always renewed through the bonds of Baptism in the name of the Triune God.

It can be asked, however, if we live up to the challenge that this vision represents:

- Surely, there are different approaches towards the goal of visible unity of the Church as the last Bilateral Forum in Breklum/Germany underlined.
- Painfully we admit that new divisions are surfacing about ethical choices and moral values, particularly as they are related to more than principles, but to the care for one another and the diaconal ministry of the Church.
- There is no one, clear cut concept for the institutional expressions of the fellowship of churches in different contexts. Christians and churches struggle to respond to the changing environment in developing different models of councils of churches, churches together or more recently also inter-faith councils.
- There continues to be a lively debate on mission and evangelism as we have seen during the Edinburgh Centennial celebrations.
- Still relationships between churches from the ancient tradition of the early Church to newly emerging communities of Christians who experience the power of the Holy Spirit as transforming reality are weak and fragile.
- More work needs to be done that churches respond together with clear proposals to the financial crises and , for instance, the blockade in climate change negotiations.
- We have been divided in the past over the doctrine of just war and the search for just peace. The future of Jerusalem has been probably the most important focal point of these debates.
- And yes, we still have not arrived at a shared theological basis for inter-religious dialogue and cooperation despite the urgency of the matter.

All of this is true.

But the ecumenical movement will continue and will flourish as long as we make the prayer of Jesus our own and challenge each other to respond to it through our lives and the common witness of our churches.

Ecumenism of the 20th century has deeply transformed relationships between churches that were divided for generations and has brought Christians of all traditions closer to each other. Having taken the more easy options for cooperation and change in the past, we are now left with the more difficult steps forward. Progress is at times less dramatic and more cumbersome to achieve. Maybe even the ecumenical movement has made the challenges domesticated – so that we can live with the remaining problems as we can live with internal tensions and divisions in our churches.

Starting last year as the General Secretary of the WCC, I had the privilege to meet representative of churches, ecumenical partners, secular organizations and states from all over the world who came to Geneva. I have visited many churches and listened to both stories of hope and despair. I have seen the ecumenical movement at work. Partnership between churches, solidarity, mutual accountability and shared advocacy are not empty words but valid expressions of reliable and trustworthy relationships among churches in all continents.

We often call this web of mutually committed and accountable relationships the fellowship of churches or *koinonia* in the Greek language of the apostles. As far as I am concerned, the WCC will continue to work for the deepening of this fellowship among member churches and the broadening of the fellowship beyond the existing membership independent of the seasons - whether it is spring, summer autumn, or winter. Gratefully I received a wonderful Highland scarf from the delegation of Scottish ecumenists visiting Geneva last week. Amongst other proper clothes, we can handle different temperatures and weather conditions – as some of us are used to for the whole of life. When I visited Pope Benedict XVI I gave him some Norwegian woollen mittens to make him mindful of our need to handle different weather and seasons.

Let me assure you that I also experience – literally and figuratively – the sunny days as well. Both in North and South, East and West, I see the enthusiastic development of ecumenism in the Nordic countries. I see that churches are blessed by being part of the Ecumenical Movement – making them able to define better their calling and their role. The Ethiopian Tewado Orthodox Church - the biggest in Africa, is very clear on how they have learnt about addressing the HIV /AIDS pandemic from the ecumenical movement – for example through the EHAIA programme.

I see how the ability to give a common statement on one of the most burning issues of ecumenism today, within a multireligious world – is possible and something we do proudly and gladly.

The call to work for climate justice and environmental issues are shared by all the Christian confessions of churches (Evangelicals, Orthodox, Protestant, etc.)

Developing the vision in mutual accountability

If we accept that the ecumenical vision was given to us by Christ himself, we nevertheless have the task to interpret and live out this vision in the contexts of our time. The theme is also right in this regard. We constantly need to *develop* the vision in response to changing realities and broadening horizons. This is the main reason why we will not easily arrive at common responses and struggle with the meaning of different concepts. Developing the vision will remain a matter of dialogue and the search for consensus that respects diversity of contexts and traditions.

We should not be surprised that we wrestle with some of the profound and most important questions for the future of humankind and the churches, but rather affirm the space for dialogue that the churches created with the World Council of Churches. The members of the first Central Committee of the WCC declared in the *Toronto Statement* of 1950 that different ecclesiologies do not prevent ecumenical dialogue, but rather call for it. They knew that the member churches of the WCC came into fellowship with each other from diverse and sometimes contradicting perspectives and convictions, but they were ready to move forward together and to hold each other accountable on the way. Toronto is often quoted referring to what it says about what the WCC is not – however it also states what the WCC is.

I have focused on mutual accountability as an essential attitude for the ecumenical journey¹. *“This attitude implies an open and reliable relation, sharing in humility and solidarity, open and listening to all parts of the communion – not at least the less privileged parts. This must be combined with a firm and consequent willingness to remain in binding relations. In this comprehensive meaning mutual accountability as ecumenical attitude represents a quality of relation for the ecumenical process...Mutual accountability is an attitude corresponding to a description of the ‘Body of Christ’. The profound meaning of being mutually accountable in an ecumenical relation is to be accountable to God, sharing in practice the gifts of God – to the honour of God and for the benefit of the other. Thus, mutual accountability can be seen as a criterion for any ecumenical effort, a quality of the relation called ‘koinonia’ in faith, life and witness.”*

Adopting the consensus procedures for the WCC decision making bodies was not just a technical issue. It was a response to the profound theological insight that moving forward together requires a quality of spiritual discernment, in which all are ready to listen to each other, recognizing the gifts the other received from God. This understanding of fellowship in mutual accountability and the ethos of consensus are the practical expressions of the fact that – as the Second Vatican Council stated it – we are in already existing, but not yet full communion.

Changing horizons and the roles and functions of the WCC

This is the spirit in which churches through the WCC can together engage in developing the ecumenical vision. Moving forward in this spirit requires the constant effort of reading the signs of the time, analyzing the changing horizons and theological reflection, and projecting the vision into the future. This is the way how we identify strategic goals and develop our understanding of the roles and functions of the WCC.

I think that through the work of various committees and discussion in the Central Committee, we arrived at a much better understanding of the current trends, the achievements of the ecumenical movement, obstacles we are facing, the way to go, and the tasks of the WCC as a fellowship of churches that serves also the one ecumenical movement.

There is considerable agreement concerning the main trends that are to be addressed:

- The impact of the continuing financial crises on people and whole countries together with the lack of action concerning climate change and other environmental concerns;
- The longing for peace with justice in so many places of this world, but especially in and around Jerusalem;
- The rising economic wealth of middle income countries like China, India and Brazil, suggesting a geopolitical shift of power;
- The growth of Christianity in the global south and the changing ecclesial landscape with the ever increasing importance of Pentecostal and charismatic churches and communities that we have begun to address through initiatives like the Global Christian Forum;
- Divisions between and within churches on moral and ethical issues which affect both the search for unity and common action for human rights;
- And the implications of religious pluralism in all parts of the world with many positive, but also very difficult aspects to it.

Addressing these changes in an effective way requires ecumenical dialogue among those, who hold different opinions and interest, in order to foster strategic cooperation. But instead, we were also confronted in past decades with a growing multiplicity of ecumenical actors and sometimes even competition among them. Combined with considerable uncertainties concerning the goals and methods for joint action, the result was the fragmentation and weakening of the ecumenical movement.

We have to admit that the WCC at times contributed to these developments. The document on the *Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC* stated that the WCC is not the secretariat in Geneva as such, but the fellowship of the member churches and that, therefore, the churches themselves through the WCC call each other to unity and cooperate in mission and joint advocacy for justice and peace. The necessary change of the organizational culture, methods and working styles, however, proved to be far more difficult. The CUV document also underlined that the WCC is not the centre, but a key-actor in a poly-centric ecumenical movement. Still it was difficult for "Geneva" to recognize that the WCC was no longer a privileged actor, almost alone at the international level. With new communication technologies, falling transportation costs etc, many tasks taken up by the secretariat were carried forward by many other church related and faith based organizations. I understand that Regional Ecumenical Organizations and some of the National Councils of Churches were confronted with similar problems at regional and national levels so that churches started to experiment with other models for their common witness and action.

Recognizing the need for change, the WCC began to rethink its roles and functions for member churches and the ecumenical movement. I made sure that every effort that helps to overcome competition, but fosters constructive cooperation gets the necessary support. I can see that increasing prominence is being given to the WCC's role to care for the oneness of the otherwise fragmented ecumenical movement by member churches and ecumenical partners such as Christian World Communions, mission societies, specialized ministries, conciliar ecumenical bodies and others.

We are refocusing now on the basic roles of the WCC in *giving leadership* in the ecumenical movement through:

- its convening role;
- providing the potential for a common voice;
- ensuring ecumenical cooperation;
- and fostering greater coherence.

The power of definition is also to legitimize and settle the common perspectives -- climate change/economic justice etc. It is also to define the common calling and challenges the fellowship of support. We are called to make the churches dine and define. Sharing life-sharing the deepest expression of human relations, meals – but also sharing of the Lord's Table. The respect for the church's position must be taken into account- but also our common witness of a split table of one Lord. The sign of sharing the bread for the world is still a sign of not sharing, but dividing and we cannot accept it.

The most tangible expression of the refocusing of the roles and functions of the WCC and the kind of relationships and methods this requires will be the forthcoming assembly of the WCC in 2013 in Busan, Republic of Korea. We will have a chance to speak about the assembly more in detail at a later moment in the programme. But I want to underline here that Central Committee has opted for a composition of the *Assembly Planning Committee* (APC) with only half of the members elected by the Central Committee, but the other half delegated by ecumenical partners and churches beyond WCC membership. In addition to a Roman Catholic member, the Central Committee invited the World Evangelical Alliance and Pentecostal churches to nominate their representatives. It was a very promising sign for me that all accepted this invitation and the APC started working in the ethos of fellowship and consensus.

A new profile and clear priorities for the WCC

Refocusing the work of the WCC also requires determining in a fresh way the priorities of the WCC so that the work done by the organization really responds to the challenges the churches are facing. They need to be addressed not for, but with the churches and our ecumenical partners. An observation made by the *Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century*, which was also affirmed by the *Assembly Planning Committee*, has offered us a fruitful starting point. One of the construction principles of the WCC has been that it included step by step the major streams of the ecumenical movement with the movements for Faith and Order, Mission, Life and Work, and Christian Education. It is not difficult to see that these movements correspond to the classical dimensions of being church, i.e. *koinonia*, *martyria*,

diakonia and *didache* with *leiturgia*, common prayer and spiritual life, as their common foundation.

The major streams of the ecumenical movement had to adjust over the years to the changing context and new organizational environments. Some have changed considerably, some show greater continuity. But like we have to overhaul the WCC as an organization and renew even the governance structures to respond to the new context, we have to take a fresh look at these streams as they continue to exist with commissions and within the structure of the secretariat in Geneva. Therefore, I proposed not to take the present form of the streams as starting points, but rather the more fundamental question how the different dimensions of being church shape and enrich our understanding of the needed profile and priorities of the WCC.

We have started this process now beginning with our staff in Geneva. We will continue it with the Pre-Assembly evaluation of our work and the planning for the assembly together with our partners. The reflection on agenda and priorities in the 5 areas of *koinonia*, *martyria*, *diakonia*, *didache*, and *leiturgia*, will be guided by the following questions:

- a. What is your analysis of the area concerned:
 - What is the present 'state of the art' in the area? What do you see as new developments and trends which might be important for the future work in this area?
 - What are the most important actors at this moment and in the future?
 - What is the role of the churches at this moment and which role will or should they play in the future?
- b. What needs to be the future the role of the WCC in this area based on the WCC basic profile and roles in the ecumenical movement?
- c. What should be the post-assembly agenda for the area of work taking into account:
 - the assembly theme: *God of life, lead us to justice and peace*;
 - the need for interreligious dialogue and cooperation
 - and the changing ecclesial landscape.

This approach will help us to see, for instance, our work with Indigenous Peoples and Dalits, on economic justice and the ecology, for human rights, nuclear disarmament and the Middle East far more in an integrated way with the churches as actors.

Of course, the most exciting and interesting issues are surfacing at the inter-sections of the five dimensions of being church. Let me use Jerusalem as an example:

When we engage together as churches in Jerusalem, in the region and worldwide for a peaceful and just solution for the future of the city, we will realize that working for a solution requires a multi-dimensional approach in which the expertise of people working on issues of church and society, justice and service, but also unity, Christian solidarity and accompaniment, mission and interfaith dialogue all need to come together. It is the beauty of the staff community of the WCC that it combines the diversity of contexts and cultures with, a broad range of skills and expertise, and works with the churches in service and solidarity with reflection and calls for the combination of these dimensions. The situation in the Middle East calls for different ecumenical initiatives gathering solidarity, reflections, calls for freedom and

democracy. The WCC is not coming from outside. We are the fellowship of the churches in their countries, but also in other countries, Syria, Iraq, Egypt.

I am offering you here a look into the kitchen of our present efforts to refocus the organization and to make it more meaningful for our churches in close cooperation with our partners. This is work in progress that we will bring to the assembly. I hope, trust and pray that we will discern with the help of God a new profile and new priorities of the WCC that will reenergize the member churches and the ecumenical movement. This is a process of renewal, of dying and rebirth, of conflict and reconciliation. We read in Paul's letter to the Colossians about Christ: *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.* The transformation required for real renewal and for peace and reconciliation in this divided and broken world has begun with Jesus crucified and risen outside of the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

I began my service as General Secretary of the WCC with a sermon on the cross and reflections about the ecumenical movement of the cross. The longer I am responsible for this work, the deeper I understand the wisdom of God that led me to chose this emphasis for my office.

The answer St Paul gives to the challenge of divisions and groupings in the church of Christ, is to ask rhetorically: Is Christ divided? And then – to say that he did not want anybody else among them – Jesus Christ and him crucified. The Christ who suffered and lost his life for the sake of all humanity, is the one who also unites us in his sacrifice, solidarity with all who suffer from injustice and in his presence as the crucified and risen Lord. The cross proves everything. The exclusivity of the cross is that all are included in the cross, in the love of the crucified and risen Christ.

ⁱ Olav Fykse Tveit, *Mutual Accountability as Ecumenical Attitude. A Study in Ecumenical Ecclesiology Based on Faith and Order Texts 1948-1998*, Oslo 2001; the quote is taken from the summary