



# Global Christian Forum

A presentation to the

**48<sup>th</sup> International Ecumenical Seminar**  
*Non-denominational and Trans-confessional Movements*  
**July 2- 9, 2014**  
**Strasbourg, France**

In February 1991 the World Council of Churches held its 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly (in Canberra, Australia) under the theme *Come Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation*. It was the first time the WCC chose a "Spirit-oriented" theme for an assembly, and obviously it meant that some attention had to be given to the Pentecostal movement. That happened in the section that dealt with unity, under the title *Spirit of Unity – Reconcile Your People*. It led to a series of recommendations which were adopted by the assembly, encouraging the WCC and its member churches to rediscover the New Testament teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, to uphold the validity of the pentecostal experience, to foster relationships between the ecumenical and pentecostal movements, to invite pentecostal theologians to join the Faith and Order Commission, etc.

In the period following the seventh assembly, the WCC developed a whole new style of relating to pentecostal, evangelical and independent churches that were not part of its membership. While in the past, particularly after the fifth assembly in 1975 in Nairobi, relationships were limited to the global level, between the WCC and bodies like the World Evangelical Alliance, World Vision etc., in the 1990s a dialogue in various regions was initiated involving WCC member churches and churches belonging to the Pentecostal and evangelical movements. This was done in small meetings of about thirty participants, two-thirds of whom would be pentecostal / evangelical and one-third WCC-related. A lot of effort was invested in identifying Pentecostal, evangelical and independent churches and their organizations (e.g. Evangelical alliances), establishing contact with their leadership, explaining the motivations of the WCC, issuing invitations, coping with

hesitations, fear and sometimes outright negative responses. The methodology used in the meetings was largely developed empirically. It was a mixture of the ecumenical way of working, with papers and discussion on issues, and testimonies and stories in the pentecostal – charismatic style. The main purpose was for participants from different faith traditions to get to know each other, to create some mutual trust between churches that had never been in conversation with one another, to address misunderstandings and prejudices and to encourage the continuation of the dialogue in local settings.

This intensive exposure to the reality of the pentecostal and evangelical movements "on the ground" helped those who were involved on behalf of the WCC to begin building a network of relationships, and to become more aware of the changes in world Christianity in the twentieth century and their importance for the ecumenical movement, in particular the exponential growth of the Pentecostal movement.

In the second half of the 1990s the WCC embarked on a major reflection process, together with its member churches, on the *Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC* (CUV). The focus of it was the deepening and widening of the concept of "fellowship of churches" as stated in the Basis of the WCC. Implied in the process was the recognition that a significant part of world Christianity was not part of the fellowship and could not be expected to join in any foreseeable future: the Roman Catholic Church, of course, but also the overwhelming majority of the Pentecostal, evangelical, independent and other newly emerging churches. Fifty years after its founding assembly (Amsterdam, 1948) and almost a century after the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement (Edinburgh, 1910), the WCC was facing an entirely new ecclesial global context. From a handful a hundred years earlier, the number of pentecostal Christians had grown to one quarter of world Christianity, equal to the number of Christians represented by the WCC itself. The vision of bringing together all the Christian churches in one community of faith, communion and witness, was much farther away from becoming true than the founders of the movement had hoped for.

It was the awareness of this new reality which prompted the then General Secretary of the WCC, Rev. Dr. Konrad Raiser, to propose the idea of a *Forum* in which all the main Christian traditions,

the old *and* the new, would be able to come together around the same table. Such a Forum would not replace the WCC, but would provide a new initiative towards achieving a goal that was now beyond the reach of the WCC as a membership organization.

Here it is important to keep in mind that the ecumenical movement is broader than the WCC. Many national and regional conciliar bodies have churches in their membership which are not member of the WCC, including pentecostal and evangelical denominations. The Roman Catholic Church has become a major ecumenical player since the Second Vatican Council. It was therefore from the outset essential for the WCC to propose the Forum as a gathering of *all* the churches, all the Christian traditions, and not as a mechanism for dialogue between the WCC and the pentecostal and evangelical movements. In particular, the participation of the Roman Catholic Church was crucial.

The first consultation on the Forum proposal, in 1998, was nothing else than a typical WCC meeting. It was held at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute. With the exception of one Catholic and one Pentecostal, all the forty or so participants were related to the WCC. The group did catch the Forum idea as a potential model for a more representative, more inclusive gathering of the main Christian families, based on participation, not membership. It stated the purpose in terms of unity, reconciliation and more inclusive relationships, and suggested to call together a large international meeting, "within a year or two" to launch the Forum. To this end a small Continuation Committee was set up.

It did not take the Continuation Committee long to realize that not much would be achieved without a measure of assurance that pentecostal and evangelical leaders would welcome the Forum idea. The committee resolved therefore to begin with inviting a group of them for a discussion. That sounds quite normal but in fact it was a wager. Nobody knew how these leaders would react to an invitation coming from a group they would inevitably identify with the WCC. To enhance trust, it was decided to hold the meeting not in Geneva but at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, USA, an evangelical stronghold. This was the first tangible move in the process towards the Forum indicating that there was a serious intention to do things differently. It helped. The meeting took place in September 2000 and revealed an amazing, and gratifying

degree of common mind. Those present agreed that time had come to overcome the divisions of the twentieth century between 'ecumenical' and 'evangelical'. They drafted a provisional "purpose statement" and for the first time the name "Global Christian Forum" was coined. The meeting paved the way for a next step. Another result was that the World Evangelical Alliance became represented on the committee, albeit informally. But the Continuation Committee was still not convinced that the conditions were in place to launch the Forum through a major global event. Instead, it opted for a smaller and less ambitious gathering, a consultation, at a lower level than top church leadership.

It took another two years to make the consultation happen, in June 2002, again with Fuller Theological Seminary as venue. Four years altogether, since 1998, an indication of the road the committee had to travel to get a sense of how to break new ground. For instance, how to compose, in terms of numbers, a meeting in which all the main Christian families, or traditions, are represented? Proportionally, according to global statistics? That would mean 50% Catholic to begin with! A very different consideration became eventually the determining factor: making sure that the voice would be heard of those who hitherto had been excluded (deliberately or by neglect) from the ecumenical table. It was decided that half of the seats (50%) in the meeting would be allocated to pentecostal, evangelical and independent representation, and the other half to representation of churches involved in the ecumenical movement, including the Catholic Church. This 50-50 model, introduced empirically at the first Forum consultation, has since become a basic organizing principle of the Global Christian Forum for all its meetings.

In the experience of the Forum, the equal representation of 'evangelical' and 'ecumenical' reflects a recognition of equal partnership, not based on statistics, but in terms of the validity of two very different commitments to the Christian faith in its relation to the individual and the society. The Forum aims at healing divisions between all Christian traditions. It recognizes however that one major fault line, if not *the* one, is between the two movements that have marked the churches during the twentieth century: the ecumenical movement and the evangelical – pentecostal movement. A alternative way to present this faultline, which can sometimes help to overcome entrenched positions of 'ecumenical' versus 'evangelical' or vice-versa, is between the older or 'historic' churches (Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Protestant) and the new ones (Evangelical,

Pentecostal, non-denominational churches, neo-Pentecostal, neo-Charismatic, newly emerging churches etc).

Another fundamental question the Continuation Committee had to address when it planned this first Forum event in 2002, was about the nature and style of the consultation. Should it be a meeting with well-known speakers from different traditions, presenting papers on a major theme, e.g. Christian unity, followed by discussions on questions prepared in advance, group reports, and adoption of a final document reflecting the findings of the consultation? The pentecostal and evangelical members of the committee were doubtful that this 'ecumenical' model would work with their constituency. In the pentecostal tradition, meetings are filled with testimonies, stories, prayer and worship, and a good deal of the business is done this way. Pentecostals, and many evangelicals as well, are uneasy with the academic, parliamentary style of the established churches and the ecumenical movement. The committee was especially concerned with how to begin the meeting (apart from an opening worship). It felt that if the right start was made the rest would flow more or less. This reflection led to a choice that would determine the future of the Forum: the consultation would begin with a sharing of the individual faith stories of the participants, in the pentecostal way of giving testimony. The committee made this choice "in fear and trembling", not knowing that it was laying the ground for what has become one of the hallmarks of the Global Christian Forum.

Ever since that consultation in 2002, each Forum meeting begins with this sharing of faith stories, in plenary or in groups. Each participant is invited to speak for about five minutes about his or her encounter with Christ, what the Christian faith has meant in his or her life, what changes it has brought. The experience has shown that this is a powerful and effective way for people coming from very different traditions to discover one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. It creates a sense of trust and togetherness that permeates the rest of the meeting, and shapes attitudes which help when controversies emerge in the discussions around issues on which participants disagree profoundly.

The 2002 consultation brought together sixty participants from all parts of the world and "all parts of the Body of Christ": African Instituted Churches, Anglican, Baptist, Disciples, Evangelical, Friends, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Moravian, Old-Catholic, Orthodox

(Eastern and Oriental), Pentecostal, Reformed, Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, Seventh-Day Adventist. This diversity, and the presence of thirty Evangelicals and Pentecostals, could be achieved thanks to the experience and the network developed in the 1990s, and the contacts of the evangelical and pentecostal members of the committee (that was also the case of the earlier meeting in 2000). The sharing of faith stories was an incredible experience. It was done in plenary and took the whole first day plus the first session of the next.

This first consultation was decisive for the future of the Forum, not only because of the faith stories and the 50-50 representation, but also for several other reasons:

- It conceived the Forum as a *process*, rather than a one-time event or various events. That is to say, the activities of the Forum should be part of a process with an overall, common purpose.
- It proposed that the common purpose of the process should be to create a *space* (or spaces) of mutual trust, wherein representatives of churches of very different traditions can come together, get to know each other, respect each other and together identify and address common challenges.
- It proposed that a *series of consultations* be organized in the major regions of the world (Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, Middle East, North America, Pacific), with the possibility of culminating in a larger meeting at world level.
- It recommended to enlarge the committee so as to include more members from the global South and from Evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

The consultation also expanded and finalized the provisional purpose statement proposed by the group that met two years earlier, so much so that it has remained unchanged until today:

*"To create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and interchurch organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges."*

Following the 2002 consultation, four regional consultations were implemented, all more or less of the same model and the same size (fifty to seventy participants), in Asia (2004), Africa (2005),

Europe (2006) and Latin America (2007). This process made it possible to enlarge the circle of participation, to test the purpose of the Forum in different regional contexts, to involve large Pentecostal denominations like the Assemblies of God, the Church of God (Cleveland), the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel etc., to involve the Regional Episcopal Conferences of the Roman Catholic Church, and to prepare the way for the first global gathering of the Global Christian Forum, which took place in November 2007 in Limuru, Kenya.

At the Limuru gathering, leaders of the Orthodox churches, the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions, the Vatican, the World Evangelical Alliance, Pentecostal churches and the World Council of Churches, stated in unequivocal terms the importance of the Global Christian Forum and the resolve of their churches and organizations to be part of it. The Forum was recognized as the only space where the Christian church worldwide can gather in all its diversity, with the purpose of fostering unity and common witness. Instead of "one or two years" as thought in 1998, it had taken nine years to get there.

This first part of the process of the Forum, 1998 – 2007, was the object of a six-months evaluation in 2008 by three independent study centers. The success of the Limuru global Forum and the results of the evaluation provided the basis for a three year program 2009 – 2011 that was drawn up during a meeting in November 2008. This was again a program of regional meetings, with the purpose of extending and deepening the process. A second global gathering was held in Manado, Indonesia, in October 2011, and the Global Christian Forum is now gearing up towards its third global event, scheduled for 2016, most likely in Latin America.

The Global Christian Forum is first and foremost about *relationships*. One of its functions has been, and continues to be, to create opportunities for churches that have not been in conversation with one another, to meet and get to know each other. Considerable efforts have been made to establish and nurture relations with the classical Pentecostal churches, with Evangelical Alliances (national and regional) and with the African Instituted and other independent churches. By now, many of these churches and alliances, federations etc. in various parts of the world know about the Forum, respond to invitations and participate in meetings. Some not yet, e.g. some large Pentecostal denominations in North America and Europe, but relationships are improving. Since

several years already the Forum has also been able to involve churches of the migration, in Europe and to a lesser extent in the USA. At the second global gathering, in Indonesia in 2011, some mega-churches were present for the first time (from the USA, South Africa and Argentina). In Latin America, the Forum is supporting a *Pentecostal Forum of Latin America and the Caribbean*, initiated by a few Pentecostal leaders who experienced the Global Christian Forum. This has made it possible to make contact with some neo-pentecostal groups. In Africa, the Forum has begun to reach out to the so-called neo-charismatic churches, e.g. in Ghana and Nigeria.

The enormous diversity of the Pentecostal movement, the emergence and growth of non-denominational, neo-charismatic and other new forms of churches, the expansion of mega-churches and churches of the migration require a sustained effort to continue building and nurturing relationships. One of the difficulties is that many of these new manifestations of being church are non-institutional and not, or only informally, organized nationally or internationally. By their very nature these groups do not operate the way 'mainline' churches and ecumenical and evangelical organizations do, by representation. For example, mega-churches have an international network and leaders meet annually, but none would be entitled to represent the group as a whole. Authority is based on spiritual and leadership recognition, not on delegation. To draw these and other groups into the space of the Global Christian Forum, it may become necessary to develop new models of relationship and participation, more flexible and more diverse, something that will call for more willingness on the side of the historic churches to adjust! Interestingly, the Vatican has gained some experience in relating to non-denominational churches, with the help of Catholic charismatic groups. It remains that for all these groups, the model proposed by the Global Christian Forum to follow Christ's prayer for unity, less academic and more spiritual, is more attractive than the classical ecumenical proposition.

But the Global Christian Forum is not *only* about relationships. From the beginning the question has been on the table how to deal with the issues that come up when churches meet. In the particular context of the Forum some of these could be very controversial, e.g. moral issues, interfaith dialogue, the perception of traditional churches that Pentecostals practice proselytism, etc. A discussion on any of these questions could jeopardize all the hard work of building

relationships, trust and mutual respect. It was therefore admitted that it was better to avoid these discussions, at least for a time, and to focus rather on removing misunderstandings and prejudices regarding one another's traditions, and on issues that offered perspectives of agreement. That was the overall policy. There were exceptions, in some instances it turned out to be possible to begin a conversation on one or the other of these dividing points.

However the challenge remained, and one of the criticisms voiced by opponents of the Forum was precisely that it was not tackling the hard questions. The second global gathering in Indonesia, 2011, took an important action in this regard. Noting that the Purpose Statement speaks of "exploring and addressing common challenges" the gathering said that the time had come to move forward doing so. Since then, the GCF Committee has identified two issues and has outlined the processes:

- *The Call to Mission and the Perception of Proselytism*. This theme will be dealt with in small working groups in several locations and regions over a two year period, with the aim to produce a document.

- *Discrimination, Persecution and Martyrdom: Facing the Challenge Together*. A major consultation will be organized on this theme in 2015.

It should be stated here that it has never been the intention to deal in depth with all the issues that emerge in the meetings. The specific vocation of the Global Christian Forum is to address matters on the faultline between 'ecumenical' and 'evangelical', not to duplicate the work of Faith and Order or of the bilateral theological dialogues etc.

In order to retain its ability to function as it has done for the past fifteen years, it is essential for the Global Christian Forum to remain a *movement*. It is not, and should not be institutionalized. It should not become yet another international ecumenical organization, with the risk of competing with others, e.g. the WCC, and of getting solely preoccupied with its administrative sustainability. The Forum is based on participation, not membership.

The other sine qua non condition for the Forum to operate as it does is its *autonomy*. Although it came into being as a result of a WCC initiative, the Global Christian Forum does not depend on the WCC, nor on any other particular ecclesial structure. It is under the responsibility of a committee on which participating churches and organizations are represented.

Tribute should be paid here to the WCC, which "let it go" while providing essential financial assistance, together with others, for its very light operational structure to function.

After the Limuru global gathering in 2007, the Continuation Committee was gradually reorganized to become the Committee on the Global Christian Forum, with representatives of (in alphabetical order) the:

Anglican Communion, Asian Evangelical Alliance, Association of Evangelicals of Africa, Baptist World Alliance, Church of God (Cleveland), Ecumenical Patriarchate, General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventist Church, International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, Lutheran World Federation, Mennonite World Conference, Methodist World Council, Organization of African Instituted Churches, Pentecostal World Fellowship, Pontifical Council for Promoting of Christian Unity, Russian Orthodox Church, Salvation Army, Syriac Orthodox Church, World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Council of Churches, World Evangelical Alliance, World YWCA, and a member of the Assemblies of God USA.

The Pentecostal World Fellowship, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance are the four "pillars" of the Global Christian Forum. Each one has two representatives on the committee.

Hubert van Beek

25.06.2014

## **Appendice 1**

### **Guiding Purpose Statement:**

To create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and interchurch organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.

In the spirit of John 17:21 “ that all of them may be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me” and because of our faith in a reconciling God (2 Cor.5: 18-21) a forum could pursue the following:

- Deepen our commitment to God’s Word and mission in the world;
- Enhance our understanding of contemporary expressions of Christian mission;
- Pursue principles and practices that enable us to deal freely, responsibly and peaceably with our Christian differences and distinctive qualities;
- Engage in theological reflection in areas of mutual concern;
- Strengthen the wholeness of the church by encouraging communication and cooperation;  
and
- Foster relationships that may lead to common witness.

Limuru, November 2007.