

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

The Work Of The Special Commission On Orthodox Participation In The WCC In A Broader Perspective

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In the last decade of the last century, the ecumenical century, it became clear that the regional and international ecumenical instruments in the form they were set up in the 1940's were no longer necessarily the most appropriate or effective ones to serve today's ecumenical movement. In England a radical review of the British Council of Churches led to its demise and in its place Churches Together in England and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland were set up with a more inclusive membership. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Black-majority churches became full members. It was understood that these ecumenical bodies were not structures over against the churches but instruments to help churches work together, with authority for decisions remaining within each member church. This had an effect on local councils of churches in towns all aover England which became 'churches together in'....Similar revisions of structures happened in other parts of the world, or are currently under discussion, as is the case in the United States of America.

In the early nineties the World Council of Churches also embarked on a process of self evaluation and revision in preparation for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Council at the Seventh Assembly in Harare. The Common Understanding and Vision (CUV) process invited the churches to express together their motivating ecumenical vision and to reflect on what sort of ecumenical instrument at the world level would best serve the

contemporary ecumenical movement. There were many good things that emerged in the process not least of all the affirmation of the fundamental principle that the Council was not an institution over against the churches but a 'fellowship of churches'. The process, however, was by no means as radical as the one in Britain and Ireland. It ended up with re-stating a motivating vision which was hardly an advanced on earlier Assembly statements as well as fairly conservative suggestions for changes to the structure and agenda of the Council.

Although the Roman Catholic Church offered a considered response to the process, it was never asked sharply what sort of instrument it could consider being a part of at the world level. It would then have been the responsibility of the member churches of the WCC to answer whether they were prepared to re-form themselves into such a body. It is important that this debate is engaged in openly and the issues set out clearly. For many, it is becoming anachronistic to have a world body of Christians without the largest church in Christendom present as a full member around the table. The Roman Catholic Church's participation in some of the programmes of the Council and the Joint Working Group is greatly valued. Its full membership of the Faith and Order Commission is crucial and makes a considerable impact upon the theological agenda. This may have not a little to do with the fact that it is not always easy to get Faith and Order's work received in the meetings of the entire Council, though this is clearly a matter of conjecture and is difficult to prove. The absence of the Roman Catholic Church from the World Council of Churches as a full member of the fellowship is keenly felt by those who are active in regional and local councils in which that church plays an increasingly active, and sometimes leading, role.

One suggestion to emerge within the CUV process was that in addition to the World Council of Churches there should be a Forum of churches at the world level which would gather together a more diverse group of Christians, including Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Evangelicals and indigenous churches. Some member churches of the WCC were not favourably disposed to the suggestion, many of them anticipating the burden that would be

entailed in having to support two ecumenical bodies at a world level. Nor was it immediately clear what agenda would belong to the one body and what to the other. However, for some Pentecostals and Evangelicals who have sometimes been opposed to the WCC and its programmes, there was a clear attraction in a less tight organisation with a different mandate. Their agenda is not one so obviously focussed on the search for the visible unity of the Church, at least as that has been expressed in successive statements of Assemblies of the WCC. For some WCC member churches, the Russian Orthodox Church in particular, the idea of a larger grouping of churches without commitment to programmes seemed a not unattractive suggestion providing a way of living within a looser ecumenical structure. In the end the proposal did not progress at the time of the Harare Assembly.

However, mainly it seems encouraged by staff of the WCC, the notion of a Forum did not go away. The Pentecostals, Baptists, Mennonites, Evangelicals, continued to find the proposal attractive seeing it as capable of providing the sort of 'safe space' that was not provided by a WCC which remains suspect among their constituency. The Roman Catholic Church and others continue to discuss the idea of a more inclusive Forum which might provide what has come to be described by some as 'a safe place' for those uncomfortable with the aims, agenda and procedures of the World Council itself. The idea of the Forum continues to have its supporters.

So, while the WCC went through the CUV process, adopting a vision statement and making minor changes to its constitution, it continued rather as before. It is, however, by no means clear that the WCC can continue in exactly the same way as before. As with so many institutions it is facing a financial crisis. The meeting of the Central Committee in September, 2002, set up a group to respond to the emergency and to come up with proposals for ways in which to cut programmes and programmatic staff. It has come up with plans to re-organise around the five historic themes of the Council's work: faith and order; mission and ecumenical formation; justice, peace and creation; international affairs, peace and human security and *diakonia* and solidarity. The General Secretary, Dr Konrad Raiser, has said that 'the

adjustment of the internal organisation and leadership structure will result in a clearer profile of the WCC's programmes and strengthen its co-operation with ecumenical partners.'

The Special Commission

All of this forms the general background to the work of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. The specific background to the setting up of the Commission, following the Harare Assembly in 1998, was the growing dissatisfaction of some Orthodox with certain aspects of the Council: the way the Council takes, or appears to take decisions; the stance it takes, or appears to take, on certain subjects, for example, the ordination of women to the priesthood and issues of human sexuality; the terms of the membership of the Council which seems to lead to unrepresentative numbers, together with a perceived lack of commitment to the trinitarian basis of the Council; the worship life of the Council which seems to some to adopt certain positions and use language that compromises the Orthodox; and the failure to keep the search for agreement in faith, ecclesiology and visible unity at the heart of the Council's work with a marginalisation of the work of Faith and Order.

Matters had already come to a head before the 1998 Harare Assembly at the Canberra Assembly in 1993, partly as a result of the response to the dramatic presentation of Professor Chung on the Assembly theme, 'Come Holy Spirit Renew the Whole of Creation'. Professor Chung's presentation was all the more startling following immediately on the presentation by Parthenios, Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa, a beautiful, profound meditation on the theme of the Holy Spirit from deep within the tradition of the Church. The presentation held the work of the Holy Spirit in a trinitarian perspective. It affirmed the need for the unity of the Church because without it we hinder the Spirit's action and thus weaken the mission and service of the Church as well as its witness for the preservation of creation. We fail to recognise the Spirit at work in the Church and the world. This rich meditation was overshadowed by Professor Chung's interpretation of the theme with what one theologian

described as 'a powerful cocktail of feminist and Korean motives'. The Assembly was half shocked, half enthralled. The result was to bring to the surface issues that had been waiting to surface for some years. The Orthodox issued a statement at the end of the Assembly :

We perceive a growing danger of departure from a biblically based Christian understanding of the Trinitarian God....' 'We must guard against a tendency to substitute a private spirit, the spirit of the world or other spirits for the Holy Spirit'. They ended on a grave note – 'We must, therefore ask ourselves: has the time come for the Orthodox churches and other member churches to review their relations with the World Council?'

Things hardly improved from the Orthodox perspective in the years that followed, resulting in the withdrawal from membership of the Council of two Orthodox Churches, Bulgaria and Georgia. The Russian Orthodox Church also increasingly voiced its dissatisfaction and hinted at the possibility of withdrawal. It is interesting that the Orthodox concerns can be interpreted as their growing feeling that, for them, the WCC was no longer a safe, or comfortable, space in which to be. This may in part have been due to the fragile situation of a church like the Russian Orthodox Church in its home context. The Russian Church was struggling to adjust to the new political situation brought about by the fall of Communism and the emergence of a tension between a more conservative and a more reforming group. The WCC may well have been caught up to a certain extent in what was essentially an internal struggle.

The Special Commission: its life and working style

This was the context in which a Special Commission was set up in 1999 with 30 Orthodox representatives and 30 representatives from other member churches with Bishop Rolfe Koppe of the EKD and Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Ephesus as Co-moderators. The Group worked for three years through plenary and sub-group meetings. What was quite remarkable

was the ethos, the quality of listening to each other and the attempts to hear what the other was saying, to see it with their eyes and to understand from another perspective than one's own. There was plain speaking and there was plain response. There were times of withdrawal into separate groups. But quite quickly the group saw that the concerns the Orthodox were expressing were not their concerns only. They were concerns often shared by other member churches, not least of all by some Anglicans, Old Catholics and Lutherans. They echoed, for example, the concerns Anglicans had expressed in their own response to the CUV process. So 'their concerns' became the concerns of the group – 'our concerns'. It was a remarkable experience. The group identified 5 major areas where reform was required. These they set out in a report to the Central Committee.

The report of the Special Commission

In its introduction to its report, the Special Commission underlines two important understandings about the WCC which demand a 'mind-shift' in all its members in their understanding of the Council:

- First, the Council is a fellowship of churches **not** an entity over against the churches. It is a fellowship that seeks the visible unity of the Church. It is the churches themselves that teach and make doctrinal and ethical decisions and not the Council.
- Secondly, the Council is an instrument that holds churches in 'ecumenical space', where churches can undertake activities of all sorts together. It is not a body which undertakes its own agenda and activities apart from the churches.

In this context the Commission's report sets out its reflections on five main areas:

1. Ecclesiology

The report asks sharply – 'how do we understand the call to visible unity and how can we claim and receive together work we have already

done on visible unity?' It poses a pertinent question to the Orthodox churches - 'Is there room in your ecclesiology for other churches?' This is a telling question and puts its finger on the question of whether the Orthodox regard themselves as the only true Church or whether they are able to recognise an ecclesial reality in others. Clearly the way this question is answered will to a large extent condition the participation of a Church in the ecumenical movement and its attitude to others who see themselves as only a part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. To the other churches the question posed is - 'How do you understand, maintain and express your belonging to the one, holy, catholic and Apostolic Church?' These two questions get right at the heart of the ecclesiological issues.

2. Social and ethical issues

The report recognises the WCC as an important arena in which member churches may explore ethical issues together. There is no suggestion made by the Commission that the agenda of the Council should be limited, or censored, by any member church. But what it does ask for is that Scripture and Tradition should be taken more seriously in approaching ethical issues, that there should be greater reflection on the methodology used in approaching these issues, and that space should in future be given for all voices around the table to be heard and diverse opinions registered, with attention given to both majority and minority voices. Further, it should always be made clear that it is not the WCC that takes decisions in moral and ethical issues but the churches themselves. Authority remains with the churches. The function of the WCC is to provide an important forum in which views can be exchanged, insights gained from the experience of others and received in the formation of opinions.

3. Common prayer

This is in many ways the most sensitive part of the Special Commission's report and not surprisingly has proved the most controversial. There is a firm acknowledgement that prayer is essential

to the ecumenical movement. Common prayer must continue to be the foundation of the ecumenical endeavour, the life blood of ecumenical relations. There can be no ecumenical movement without common prayer. There is no giving up on that. All ecumenical activities are rooted in prayer. There is, however, in the report a move away from the description of prayer in ecumenical contexts as 'ecumenical worship', as if there was some special form of worship that can be branded as 'ecumenical worship'. We need to recognise how language conditions how people from different traditions relate to issues. The word 'worship' is in any case ambiguous as for some it implies eucharistic worship. Christians are not looking for another category of prayer that can be characterised as 'ecumenical worship'. In the ecumenical fellowship of churches we are committed to praying together, to engage in common prayer. In doing this we may offer one another the riches of our own tradition, praying together using the Anglican, or Methodist, or Orthodox, or Quaker tradition of prayer. In such cases the prayer would be led by the appropriate person in that tradition – a man or a woman, lay or ordained - according to the custom of the particular tradition hosting the prayer. On such occasions one tradition might choose to celebrate a eucharist applying its own rules of eucharistic hospitality. It would be quite clear that this is in fact the living tradition of a particular group being offered to all to experience. This would not be an ecumenical liturgy but the liturgy of a particular tradition to which others were invited to participate to the degree appropriate both to the presiding church and to the disciplines of those present. The experience of the richness of other traditions is an important element in the ecumenical movement and it may well be that the tendency has been to move away from this in favour of a mixed economy impoverishing the experience for some of sharing together in prayer. The response to such invitations would be governed for each person present by the ruling of his or her own church. In addition to offering the riches of particular traditions for all to experience, it is also recommended that in ecumenical gatherings elements from different traditions should be brought together in what is termed 'inter-

confessional prayer'. The drawing up of guidelines for 'inter-confessional prayer' will be an important task for the future. But there is much done already in this area on which to build.

This careful distinction of two types of common prayer that might be used in ecumenical contexts avoids the use of the term 'worship' which can be misleading and suggest to the Orthodox eucharistic worship. It also avoids the notion that the ecumenical community is after some new type of worship, modelling this new worship for a super Church 'in becoming'. It has the fear of some Orthodox that the WCC sees itself as the 'Coming great Church'.

If these suggestions of the Special Commission are adopted it would mean, and some have found this hard, that there would be no future celebrations of a so called 'ecumenical liturgy' like the Lima Liturgy, unless a particular Church had already adopted the Lima Liturgy as an authoritative liturgical text for its own use. In such a case that Church might well wish to offer it as its form of liturgy to be celebrated in an ecumenical context. It would clearly be understood that this is not an 'ecumenical eucharist' but the eucharist of the church to which the presiding minister belongs. Any offering of eucharistic hospitality would come from that church and not from the ecumenical fellowship. Any reception of the invitation would be made by the individual according to their understanding of the position of their own church and according to their own conscience.

4. Consensus decision –making

The Special Commission recommended that the WCC should move from a parliamentary style of debate and voting, where majorities carry the day and minorities are over-ruled, to a process of discerning the mind of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in which the views of all are taken into consideration. In a consensus method of discernment different views are carefully heard and recorded. Under skilful chairmanship the mind of the group is discovered. Consensus

may take different forms. Consensus is reached when a single mind is reached on a matter, or when the minority agrees to go with the majority, or when it is agreed by all to take no action, or when a consensus statement records all opinions faithfully and leaves the matter open. Consensus working never simply rules a minority out of court. It may be that the very term used by the Commission 'consensus decision-making', in fact seems to obscure this range of possibilities. But once it is understood the potential for staying together in a fellowship of discernment becomes an exciting one.

Moving to a model of consensus- forming requires skilled chairmanship as well as an understanding by the community of the process that is being followed. It also requires determining carefully what practical concerns guiding the life of the organisation, its resourcing and staffing will still need to be taken by a more parliamentary voting procedure. However, it is likely that far fewer areas will require this old method than is sometimes thought.

5. Membership

The Special Commission endorsed the work of a parallel committee which had been asked to consider the question of membership simultaneously with the Special Commission. The recommendation agreed by the two committees is that there should in future be two categories of relationship to the WCC : the first 'member churches belonging to the fellowship' and secondly, 'churches in association' with the right to speak at meetings but not to vote.

The Special Commission attached to its final report 9 recommendations covering these five areas. These the Commission presented to the meeting of the Central Committee in September, 2002. The overall response of the Central Committee was positive, though the discussions were, so it was reported, far from easy. The Central Committee determined to move to a consensus form of decision making and to move immediately to put that in place for its own meetings. It accepted the Special Commission's 'Framework

for Common Prayer', but invited more work to be done in this area. It requested the Faith and Order Commission to prepare a statement on visible unity for the next Assembly, and accepted the categories of 'members of the fellowship' and 'associate members'. The Central Committee also agreed that there should be in future a permanent Standing Commission on Orthodox participation. It appointed the existing Steering Group of the Special Commission to perform this function until the time of the next Assembly.

Final reflections

While the Central Committee has, in the main, accepted the recommendations of the Special Commission it is not at all clear that the way ahead is as smooth as this might suggest. There are those who are not happy with some of the proposals, not least of all those concerning worship. They see this as a retrograde step going back behind the fellowship in prayer that has been discovered and enjoyed within the fellowship of churches in the WCC. The dramatic resignation of Bishop Margot Kasemann of Germany over this issue has had much media attention. Bishop Margot's opinion was that the report of the Special Commission implies crucial changes for co-operation among the member churches, particularly in regard to ecumenical worship. Bishop Margot is a long time supporter of the WCC and has led in many areas. She is a major voice for ecumenism in her own church, the Evangelical Church in Germany. Her concerns need a considered response, perhaps from the Special Commission itself. How far she has fully understood the Commission's suggestions and the reasons for them deserves to be discussed. The Special Commission aimed at making the WCC a 'safe space' for the Orthodox member churches. In a similar way the creation of a Forum might provide a 'safe space' for an even more diverse group of Christians to be together, including Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Roman Catholics. Is it now possible in the light of the current explorations to contemplate not two but one fellowship of Christians at the world level? On a purely practical matter, it is unlikely that the churches will have the resources to finance two gatherings. This might lead to options being made for one or the other, to the detriment of both. It is thinkable that there should be one more inclusive fellowship at

world level it raises the question of what the central focus of a single fellowship would be. Not all are equally convinced of the need for the visible unity of the Church, at least as that has been described in the work of the WCC so far. Others, like the Anglican Communion, remain convinced by that goal, as the Bishops re-affirmed at the Lambeth Conference in 1998. The challenge for the future may well be within a single fellowship to continue exploring what sort of Christian life together God calls us to live while at the same time strengthening the unity in service and mission that we can live out now. It is often the experience at a local level, in a village or town, that by seeking to respond to local needs together matters of common prayer, including sacramental worship and structured communion, are raised in fresh ways. This can provide a stimulus to the search for visible unity, a willingness to be more open to the unity that God wills to give his people. Without an ongoing concern for the unity of the Church we fail to be faithful to the prayer of Jesus that we might be one and the agenda of service to the world is in danger of being taken captive by current worldly goals and images.

A more inclusive fellowship of Christians together at the world level, secure in one another's presence, confident that all will be listened to and not forced to take actions or make statements contrary to conscience, would need to be guided by regular Assemblies, and Central Committee meetings. In addition, a meeting of 'make it happen people', those who hold particular positions of influence in the life of the churches, might helpfully find a guiding role within the structure. The existing meetings of the Secretaries of the Christian World Communions is a useful meeting which enables learning about one another as well as consideration of the importance of joint action and reflection. A gathering of 'make it happen' people might help to overcome the gulf between the work of an ecumenical body and the life of the churches, ensuring that the ecumenical agenda is more intentionally inserted in to the lives of the churches. This has in part happened in the British context through the meeting of Church leaders which is part of the structure of the new ecumenical instrument of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

Just as a renewed fellowship would benefit from closer relations with the leadership of the churches, so it would also benefit from a clarified relation with the national and regional ecumenical bodies. The inter-relation of the agendas of these bodies is evident. In the past the churches have suffered at times from an overload of agendas, sometime on the same subject. Every ecumenical programme needs to explain why the international level is the most appropriate level for engagement with an issue. What is it that can only be done by an international fellowship and how is that then helped by a relation with the regional and national bodies.

One task of the fellowship would be to confer together over issues of crucial significance for the Church and the world today – the overcoming of violence, the culture of terror, the economic order with the unequal distribution of wealth, war and peace.... We would need to continue to address the sort of life together God is calling us to live as sign of God's kingdom in today's world. The theological agenda associated with the faith and order movement will continue in the bilateral dialogues- which are already bearing fruit in some places in changed relations of closer fellowship. But there is need also for the patient multilateral work, the work that produced the most important document of all *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, if we are to maintain consistency and coherence among the different dialogues. The General Secretaries of the Christian World Communions acknowledge this in their calling together of the regular meetings of the Bilateral Forum.

The current work on ecclesiology has much to offer for the future direction of the ecumenical movement. The Orthodox are surely right to keep reminding us of its importance.

The Special Commission on Orthodox participation in the WCC has taken us a long way in understanding what a 'safe space' would mean for the Orthodox and for some other churches. It may also have implicitly opened up a more credible option for others hitherto hesitant to join the WCC. Could we together envisage a reformed and renewed fellowship at world level which would provide a hospitable place for a more inclusive gathering of Christians? The

sort of conversation that has gone on in the Special Commission is one that needs to go on more widely with those who are not members of the Council. The discussions of the Special Commission should be brought together now with the discussions on the Forum.

What is clear is that the way the world is in the third millennium requires a different ecumenical structure from the one that came into being in the 1940's and which served the churches well in the past. The work of the Special Commission, the CUV process of which it was in some ways the continuation, and the discussions around the Forum, have taken us a long way. But the debate is not yet finished. It is crucial in today's interconnected world that Christians find a way of being together and speaking and acting together at a world level. In the past the WCC has made a difference to the life of the churches and the world as is exemplified, among other things, in the Programme to Combat Racism and the Community of Women and Men Study. Christians together will not necessarily have a single answer to offer in relation to every world problem as the Special Commission was only too aware. But they will have the same Good News to bring to the exploration of contemporary problems and issues and hopefully a determination to go on wrestling together even when deep differences remain. Being together, in spite of difference, bearing the pain of difference, staying together and working through disagreement, can be a profound witness to the Gospel of Christ. This is itself a sign of the unity God calls us to live together.

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