

WCC Faith & Order Standing Commission Meeting Crans Montana, Switzerland, 12-18 June 2007

Background

This was the second meeting of this Standing Commission on Faith and Order (F&O), and was well attended, with all but two of the thirty commissioners (plus consultants and WCC staff) able to be present or represented by proxies. Significantly, it was the last Standing Commission meeting for the Director of F&O, Rev. Dr Tom Best, for the senior member of the F&O staff team, Mrs Carolyn McComish, for Mgr John Radano, representing (for over 20 years) the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, and for one commissioner of ten years' standing, Rev. Neville Callam, from the Jamaica Baptist Union. These four persons have some 70 years of F&O experience between them, and their fellowship and institutional memory will be greatly missed as the Commission continues its work through until the next General Assembly in 2013.

Again we gathered first at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, prior to a two-hour bus trip eastward to the alpine village of Crans Montana, at an altitude of approximately 1500m, and surrounded by peaks in excess of 4500m. The Roman Catholic community at *Villa Notre Dame* were our hosts, in a former *clinique* for tuberculosis sufferers, which now functions as a religious community house, retreat centre, and modest hotel.

As always – and particularly so because this meeting was one day shorter than has been the case in recent years – the program was packed with small group and plenary sessions, daily common prayer, visitors from local ecumenical consortia, church visits, and a brief excursion to a nearby geological feature, an underground lake. Shared meals and breaks between sessions provided opportunity for more informal interaction, short walks around the village, and enjoyment of the ever-changing view as the early days of the northern summer sent us a variety of weather conditions. This form of *koinonia* is, as with every ecumenical encounter, an essential aspect of the process of searching for visible unity: building relationships characterised by trust, warmth, and mutual respect.

Business

It is fair to say that, in these early days of its life, the current Commission is still finding its feet somewhat with respect to processes and programmatic work, despite having established already a strong and lively sense of community. In particular, a number of 'structural' and 'logistical' issues needed working through in plenary alongside furthering, in smaller steering groups formed at this meeting, the various studies as approved by WCC Central Committee following the previous meeting at Faverges in 2006. These matters include:

- restructuring within the WCC (F&O is now part of Program 2 [of 6] – 'Unity' – along with Mission and Spirituality), and associated redeployment of staff;
- the nomination of a new Director for F&O from 2008 (the special nominations sub-committee presented a name which Standing Committee strongly endorsed for approval by the General Secretary and Executive Committee of WCC); and
- the role of the Plenary Committee on F&O, and its relationship to the work of Standing Commission (a Plenary Commission meeting is being planned for 2009 in Buenos Aires, and the regular nominations sub-committee – of which I'm a member – generated a list of the additional 90 names for the Plenary Commission from nominations received by the churches; this list was supported by Standing Commission and will now go before Central Committee).

- NB: nominating churches should note that the WCC has strict policies with regard to issues of balance on all of its committees and advisory bodies. As well as nominating the very best person for the task, churches need to be aware that nomination lists which contain less than 40% women, less than 15-20% 'youth' (defined – too narrowly, I suspect – as less than 30 years old at the time of nomination), and which do not contain disabled and indigenous persons are unlikely to be ratified by Central Committee. This sometimes forces nominations committees to pass over excellent candidates in other respects to ensure – quite properly – that the list submitted is adequately representative according to these criteria, every bit as much as regional and confessional ones.

Study Programs

Ecclesiology

As it awaits further responses from the churches and the academy (which are starting to come in) to the two recent texts on ecclesiology (*The Nature and Mission of the Church*, and the 9th Assembly statement, 'Called to be the One Church') this steering group seeks to work closely with the sub-committee charged with planning the program of the Plenary Commission meeting, which is looking to develop the theme of 'Church Unity' for that gathering.

Seven areas of reflection could feed into this:

- understandings of church as local and universal;
- God's action and the unity of the Church (revelation, Holy Spirit);
- different understandings and models of visible unity;
- aspects of mutual recognition, especially with respect to ministry;
- the character of difference (legitimate, illegitimate);
- authority and mutual accountability (including reception of ecumenical results); and,
- the history of the development of understandings of unity (mindful of the centenary of the Edinburgh Conference in 2010).

The co-moderators of this steering group will meet before the next Standing Commission to develop concrete programs exploring some of these topics in consultation with the Plenary Commission planning group, including the possibility of a joint consultation with CWME (Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, also under the umbrella of Program group 2) in 2008.

Baptism

The revised text, 'One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition' has reached a very mature stage and, subject to a number of minor amendments suggested in the course of the meeting, Standing Commission recommended it be prepared for publication and distribution to the churches by or before the next meeting in 2008. This text will have the status of a 'study document', and concludes with a number of questions designed to assist its use as such, rather than seeking any formal response from churches.

Moral Discernment in the Churches

This project will explore the various ways the churches make decisions about moral issues: claiming principles and practices of moral discernment we hold in common, asking why we frequently come to different conclusions in respect of particular issues, and seeking ways to prevent principled differences from becoming church dividing.

A consultation to gather resources and refine methodology for this study is proposed for March 2008 in New York, to harvest and reflect on work already done in this area (within WCC and elsewhere), and to use a case study on economic globalisation and poverty as a 'pilot' for further case studies. On the basis of this, specific recommendations for the future direction of the study will be made to Standing Commission in June 2008.

Tradition and traditions: sharing sources of authority

I was delighted to be assigned to this 'steering group' for the remainder of this Commission's working life, as this is the study that arises out of the two previous Standing Commissions' explorations in the field of ecumenical hermeneutics. The current study aims to assist churches to recognise one another as churches which draw on 'Tradition and traditions' (using these terms – at least initially – in the sense of Montreal, 1963) as sources of authority for their life and mission, albeit in different ways.

A consultation, 'The Teachers and Witnesses of the Early Church: A Common Source of Authority Various Received?', looking at how the patristic period functions authoritatively for our different traditions, is planned for September 2008, in Cambridge, England. The consultation will feature six major papers (Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Pentecostal) offering an account of how 'the Fathers' are received confessionally. Each paper will have two respondents: one from within the same church family, and one from outside. There will also be a keynote address on how the fathers read Scripture, and two 'theological listeners' will be invited to reflect on resonances and dissonances between the various receptions of the teachers and witnesses of the early church discussed at the meeting.

It is hoped that a F&O paper might emerge from the papers and conversation at this consultation, as a resource for the churches.

A second consultation – perhaps in early 2010, after the Plenary Commission on F&O has met in 2009 – is also envisaged: 'Sources and Forms of Authority for the Churches'. This time a more comparative ecclesiological approach is envisaged, beginning from a range of confessional sources of authority – ancient or contemporary (Scripture, tradition, experience, regional context, reason, etc.) – and looking again for similarities and differences in the identification and application of these sources across the churches represented.

Areas of overlap between this and the 'Moral Discernment' study were noted, and ways of using these to the advantage of both projects were suggested.

Related and Ongoing Activities

United and Uniting Churches

Planning for the international consultation of United and Uniting churches scheduled for 2008 is well advanced. The meeting is to be held 8-15 October next year in South Africa, on the theme: 'Going the Second Mile: Towards an Ecclesiology of United Churches'. Episcopacy, mission and unity, authority and the limits of diversity are among the daily program topics to be discussed at the consultation, and further information can be obtained through me or via the WCC website: www.wcc-coe.org

F&O Paper 203, 'Survey of Church Union Negotiations 2003-2006', as reprinted from *The Ecumenical Review*, 58 (July/October), 2006, continues F&O's tradition of providing a platform for monitoring this very visible form of unity since the 1930s, and was distributed at the meeting.

Bilateral Dialogues

The 9th international forum on bilateral dialogues has been pushed back slightly, since my last report, and will now take place in Germany, 10-15 March 2008 (i.e. not this year as originally hoped). 'The Vision of Unity Today' will be the theme. An advance copy of *Growth in Agreement III*, was made available to Commissioners, and looks to be another excellent volume.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

This marvellous instrument of visible unity observes its 100th anniversary in 2008. Jointly prepared and published, as always, by the PCPCU and F&O, with a particular regional input each time, the 2008 material gathers around the theme, 'Pray without ceasing (1 Thess:13b-18)', and features an extended introduction as part of the centenary celebrations. Initial preparations for the 2009 material have been made by a commission from the Korean National Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Bishops Conference in Korea. An edited volume of essays is also planned to mark this significant anniversary.

Religious Plurality and Christian Self-understanding

Located within Program 6 of the World Council is the desk for Inter-religious Relations and Dialogue. A highlight of the meeting was the visit and presentation of the Director of this unit, Hans Ucko, to Standing Commission. It is important to reiterate that the focus of this work within the Council – and particularly as it intersects with F&O – is on *intra-Christian self*-understanding as the churches engage in interfaith dialogue, rather than primarily on the substance of that dialogue. The aims of the unit, therefore, are:

- to cultivate trust and respect between religious traditions;
- to monitor bilateral relations; and,
- to encourage multilateral dialogues, especially addressing issues of common social concern, peace and violence, etc.

Specifically, 'P602', as it's known (i.e. WCC program 6, unit 2), is engaged in three activities oriented towards these goals:

- to support and monitor Jewish-Christian dialogue (as one fundamental to Christian self-understanding) – how do Jews read *NMC*?, for example; what are

the ecclesiological consequences of saying that the covenant has never been revoked?; etc.;

- to provide a platform for the study of the ‘theology of religion’, including themes of hospitality and mutual recognition; and
- to investigate the phenomenon of conversion – as it issues in violence or attempts to reconvert; unethical methods (targeting children and other vulnerable persons); so-called ‘aid evangelism’; in relation to national laws (e.g. in India); and with a view to generating, in collaboration with the Vatican, a code of conduct in these respects.

F&O continues to seek ways in which its own programmatic work can support and be enriched by this related – in some ways parallel – constellation of study. The discussion around the table in plenary, relating experiences from almost every region, bore powerful witness to its priority for the churches.

“Cloud of Witnesses” Project

Standing Commission received a report on this project centred in the Monastery of Bose. I was glad to be able to report that the NCCA had greeted the invitation to participate in ‘Cloud of Witnesses’ with enthusiasm, working ecumenically to submit a list of names. A consultation, ‘Commemorating Witnesses of the Past – an Ecumenical Opportunity’, to further this work is planned for October 2008 in Bose, and the ‘Tradition and traditions’ study (above) is keen to connect with the project, as it also deals with a particular source of authority for the churches.

25th Anniversary of BEM

A special 25th anniversary edition of this highly influential and significant F&O paper, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* has been printed. Common prayer on the Saturday morning of the meeting was given over to a simple, but very moving and powerful liturgical celebration of this anniversary, with one member of the Commission who was at the Lima meeting in 1982, Fr Frans Bouwen from the Roman Catholic church in Jerusalem, reading paragraph 20 under ‘Eucharist’, and offering some reflections on his experience of being part of the drafting process.

Engagement with Local Churches

F&O seeks, at each of its meetings, to listen to and encourage local churches and local expressions of ecumenism. At Crans-Montana this took place in four ways:

- the presence of the local Roman Catholic priest at lunch one day, who addressed the Commission as Chaplain to the local chapter of an organization established to support Christians living in ‘inter-confessional’ marriages;
- a presentation from three members of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, including a response to the revised baptism text;
- the visit of the ecumenical officer of the nearby Lausanne Council of Churches, Martin Hoegger, who was involved in planning the 75th anniversary celebrations of F&O in Lausanne (Reformed) Cathedral in 2002 – this was a particularly inspiring and energising encounter for the Commission as Martin set before us many examples of liturgical and other ecumenical and interfaith initiatives, some of which could translate well, for example, into my own ministry context; and,
- Sunday morning worship in various local churches – I attended the Protestant service, which tested my ‘schoolboy’ French(!) but was a very good experience.

Conclusion and next Meeting

In the course of our deliberations over the week, the changing nature of ecumenism was a motif which surfaced and resurfaced. Consistent with the shift from modernity to postmodernity more generally, ecumenism has become a less 'structural' and more 'organic' enterprise, with both a strong regional (e.g. through bilateral dialogues) and local impetus. What are the implications of this for a body like F&O? How can it be the best possible theological platform for ecumenism at the regional and local levels?

Even more fundamentally, perhaps, to what extent is the 'separation' between what the WCC has classically divided into 'faith and order' concerns and 'life and work' issues (ethics, praxis, the intersection of theology with the socio-political, etc.) no longer helpful, especially in so far as F&O, as a consequence perhaps, continues to operate predominately within the paradigms of modernity? In reality, of course, 'life and work' matters have *always* been integral to the work of F&O, but to the extent that the agenda of the churches today is focussed more readily through this lens, how can the 'life and work' dimension be more visible and accessible in F&O's work, without 'sacrificing' or short-changing its primary theological and ecclesiological mandate?

The new studies would appear to provide scope for such even-handedness, inviting reflection on the impact of culture and context upon confessional identity and the reception of tradition; but these are questions with which the Standing Commission – and the larger Plenary Commission when it meets in 2009 – must continue to grapple.

I'm grateful to the Anglican Church of Australia and the Uniting Church of Australia for the opportunity to participate in this multi-lateral international forum, and for meeting the costs of travel and accommodation. I also appreciate encouragement of colleagues in the Faith and Unity Commission of National Council of Churches in Australia for this work, and the very real interest in and engagement with the F&O studies by commission.

In some respects this was not the easiest of the six meetings I've attended to date, in terms of some of the issues faced by Standing Commission in stewarding F&O's work, as a result of which time for programmatic work in the four studies was squeezed, to the frustration of some commissioners, myself included at points. Nevertheless, these difficulties were clearly and constructively named and addressed, and some good and necessary forward planning was made, such that the way looks clear for our next meeting (tentatively: Cairo, Egypt, 16-22 June, 2008) to move more quickly to this core business of supporting the churches with theological resources in their journey towards deeper mutual recognition and greater visible unity.

Richard Treloar
Geneva, 18 June, 2007