

WCC Faith & Order Standing Commission Meeting June 16-22 2008; Cairo, Egypt

Background

This was the third meeting of the Commission which began its work in Faverges in the June of 2006. We were guests of the Coptic Orthodox Church at St Mark's seminary in Nasr, not far from Cairo's international airport. The hospitality of Metropolitan Bishop of Damietta Nicola, and the staff at St Mark's was warm and generous. Conditions for the meeting were, however, quite basic: one of several factors which impinged on the Commission's productivity. A long journey for most, very high ambient temperatures, an exhausting – albeit fascinating – mid-week excursion (16 hours round trip in formal attire), unreliable internet access, the need to house some commissioners off-site, changes to staffing levels and personnel in the Faith and Order Secretariat, a new Director, limited opportunity for interaction with local churches, and some significant tensions within the Commission itself made for a somewhat frustrating meeting – the most stressful, in fact, of the seven I have attended.

That said, Canon John Gibaut handled his first Standing Commission meeting as Director extremely well and his seems to be an excellent appointment; good progress was made on several studies and on planning for the Plenary Commission meeting to be held at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, 7-14 October 2009; and we were again graced by the presence of the General Secretary of the WCC, the Revd Dr Samuel Kobia, who affirmed the Standing Commission's agenda, and described the study on moral discernment as 'timely', drawing attention to the human sexuality debate in the Anglican communion of churches. In doing so, Dr Kobia named a tension being felt no less in ecumenical circles than in Anglican ones: the perception that churches must at some point choose between 'truth' and 'unity'. If, as he argued, this is a false dichotomy, then it is one that Faith and Order – and specifically the moral discernment study – must address.

In his opening address, the Director, John Gibaut, referred to the risk that stands at the heart of Christian doctrines of creation and redemption – risk that mirrors that of our current geo-political climate and of the ecumenical movement itself given the rise of new church-dividing issues both within and between communions. In this broader context, the Faith and Order movement itself faces significant risks and challenges. With the recent reduction in staffing (5.0 EFT program staff to 2.5; and 2.6 EFT support staff to 1.0) and a largely unchanged agenda, Faith and Order must find a way of doing less but doing it well. Notwithstanding this, his first impressions have been encouraging, including:

- the positive reception of recent work on ecclesiology despite only 18 formal responses from the churches to *Nature and Mission of the Church* since its release in 2006 (NB: no response received as yet from the Anglican or Uniting Churches of Australia);
- the attractiveness of a project such as "Cloud of Witnesses" (with Bose) based on holiness and healing of memory; and

- the design of the new project on moral discernment which has the potential to help generate an ecumenical way of dealing with emerging questions and preventing principled differences from becoming church dividing.

The Current Studies

Ecclesiology

No immediate action required at this stage as further responses from the churches are awaited. The working group will liaise closely with Plenary Commission planning group in order to maximise opportunity for Plenary commissioners to engage with *NMC*.

Moral Discernment in the Churches

This was the only working group to have met, in person, between the Standing Commission meetings in Crans-Montana and Cairo. A full report of that meeting (New York, March 2008) was presented to, and a time line for further work approved by, Standing Commission as follows:

- **Stage 1: case studies**
 - descriptive accounts commissioned by members of the working group (6,000 words completed with responses by June 2009) of five issues that illustrate how particular churches engage in moral discernment in relation to specific moral issues;
- **Stage 2: analytical task**
 - Plenary Commission (October 2009) to examine case studies (five groups, one study each) in order to identify points of divergence and common ground across the traditions represented, along with strategies and resources for helping churches to remain in dialogue in the midst of disagreement;
- **Stage 3: constructive task**
 - the final study document (2011-2012) will seek to offer biblical, theological, and canonical resources to help faith communities negotiate principled disagreement over moral issues.

In arriving at this proposal, the working group looked at extant material in the field from the Disciples of Christ, Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches. Potential overlap and cooperation with the study on sources of authority was considered by the working group and by Standing Commission as a whole.

Tradition and traditions: Sources of Authority for the Church

In the unavoidable absence of the two co-moderators of this study from Cairo, I was appointed acting joint co-moderator for the meeting.

Two consultations were planned for the early stage of this study, and the working group spent much of its time at Cairo fleshing out the detail of the program for the first of these. It also revisited the design and goals of the second consultation, and considered how best to present the study at Plenary Commission so as to involve commissioners as fully as possible.

1st Consultation: “The Teachers and Witnesses of the Early Church: a common source of authority variously received?” (Cambridge UK, 1-5 September 2008)

- this consultation (now complete) featured two keynote addresses on patristic hermeneutics and five ‘confessional’ addresses, each with two respondents from different traditions;
- small groups, moderated by members of the working group able to be present, discussed the papers, responses and questions, and reported back briefly to the consultation as a whole at the start of each day;
- a drafting group is scheduled to meet in early 2009 to produce a report on the consultation, and to collect and collate all written material, including all the papers and responses, the reflections of the appointed listeners, the small group reports, and the minutes from the final plenary session.

2nd Consultation: Sources and Forms of Authority for the Churches (2010)

- this consultation will take place after the input of Plenary Commission to the progress of the study, and members of the working group on moral discernment may be invited to participate;
- theologians, ecclesialogists, and ethicists, will be invited to reflect on questions such as:
 - what sources function authoritatively for my own church’s theological discernment today?
 - what is the nature or quality of the authority ascribed to various sources?
 - how are we able to acknowledge the different use of sources in traditions other than our own, and how might this speak to the unity of the churches?
 - how is ecclesial identity (memory) shaped by the way we receive sources as authoritative?

Baptism

The working group of this study presented the revised text, “One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition” to Standing Commission for its endorsement, with a view to its publication and distribution to the member churches.

Despite the text's clear status as a "a study document rather than a convergence text", and its perceived state of near readiness at Crans-Montana, several commissioners raised difficulties that their own traditions might have with points of detail within the document, and expressed a desire that the structure of the text be substantially reworked.

After much discussion, and with what felt like considerable reservations on the part of some commissioners, it was resolved to leave this study 'sleeping' until after the Plenary Commission meeting in 2009, with a view to possibly forming a new baptism working group to revisit the text in light of the questions raised in Cairo, any discussion of it in Crete, and in the light of responses to *NMC*.

Having watched this text evolve into a mature study document since joining Standing Commission in 2002, I – along with others who had witnessed its development over a similar or even longer period – experienced some disappointment and surprise at this outcome. Accordingly, I expressed an opinion to the Director that it could seem like a failure of our stewardship if the considerable and good work done to date on this study were not to be made available in some form to the churches in the short to medium term. There was some sympathy with this view, and it is to be hoped that Baptism is back on the Faith and order study agenda by 2010.

Some other Faith & Order Projects and Activities

United and Uniting Churches

An international consultation exploring an ecclesiology of united and uniting churches is planned for 29 October – 5 November 2008 in Johannesburg, in keeping with the pattern of such gatherings every six or seven years (the last being in 2002). Issues to be discussed at the consultation will include:

- the place of confessional statements and texts in uniting processes;
- episcopate; and
- united and uniting churches and Pentecostalism.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

The material for 2009 was distributed to commissioners. The white cover of the 2009 booklet is distinctively Korean, reflecting the provenance of the material, which gathers around Ezek 37:17, 'That they may become one in your hand'. The Roman Catholic Church is to host the 2010 meeting in Scotland in the centenary year of the Edinburgh International Conference on Mission, which spawned the modern ecumenical movement, thus marking the long and close partnership between the Faith and Order movement and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity.

Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues

A statement and recommendations from a meeting of representatives of various Christian World Communions and of Faith and Order in March 2008 was tabled. Having begun as something of a 'protest' movement with respect to the 'centralism' of the WCC decades ago, the relationship between such an organization and the complex array of bilateral and

multilateral dialogues at both regional and international levels is evolving, and highlights issues of ecumenical methodology. Rather than playing any sort of ‘co-ordinating’ role, CWCs look to Faith and Order to offer ‘coherence’ to the work of bilateral and multilateral dialogues at all levels. This may take the form, as in one of the report’s recommendations, of a clarification of some of the ways in which key terminology is used in various dialogues, especially in relation to their stated goals.

Publications and Website

News of several interesting and helpful publications was shared with commissioners, including:

- *Baptism Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications*, Faith and Order Paper 207, edited by Thomas F. Best (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press/Pueblo, 2008);
- *BEM at 25: Critical insights into a continuing legacy*, Faith and Order Paper 205, edited by Thomas Best and Tamara Grdzeldze (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007);
- *Love to Share: Intellectual Property Rights, Copyright, and Christian Churches*, produced by the World Association for Christian Communication and the World Council of Churches; and
- (an index of) Faith and Order Official Numbered Publications, including Series I (1910-1948) and Series II (1948-2007).

Improvements to the WCC website and, in particular, the Faith and Order pages was foreshadowed, with a ‘texts and studies’ page currently under development. Information about WCC’s ‘pre-history’ (1911-48) will be added, along with an ‘anchor page’ serving as an index for Faith and Order pages and texts accessible on the WCC website.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the difficulties referred to above, the churches’ unstinting commitment to greater visible unity through instruments such as Faith and Order, however ‘blunt’ or ‘unwieldy’ they may at times appear, is a sign of hope. In his first report, the Director posed to us Michael Kinnamon’s salutary question on such occasions: ‘how has the visible unity of the churches been advanced by what we have done here?’ If an answer to that question was not immediately obvious around the meeting table in Cairo – to this commissioner, at least – the beginnings of one were easier to detect, perhaps, in the forms of *koinonia* celebrated at common worship in the chapel and around the meal table; or in the welcome extended by His Beatitude Theodorus II, Greek Orthodox Patriarch, after the long bus trip to Alexandria, and of the desert monastic communities visited on the way back to Cairo. These powerful testimonies to the faith and witness of ancient Christian traditions in minority contexts put some of our work into a different perspective. And, after all, as Kinnamon has also been quoted as saying, ‘An ecumenical movement that doesn’t involve conversations between people who disagree would not be an ecumenical movement’.

Richard Treloar
Ss Simon & Jude, 28 October 2008