



Lukas Vischer: The Ecumenical Future and the WCC A Privileged Instrument of the Ecumenical Movement?

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2. Historical Context

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3. Summary

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the question whether the World Council of Churches is still the “privileged instrument” of the ecumenical movement, because it institutionalizes a past era. Much has changed. What would the WCC have to look like if it were being founded today?

Since 1948, the number of member churches has doubled, mainly through the addition of the Orthodox churches and churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The number of ecumenical structures has proliferated. For the churches involved, the range of ecumenical initiatives and programmes to which they are called to respond is often more than they can cope with. After the II Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church – not WCC member – took up bilateral conversations and thus strengthened the independent Christian World Communions. As the ecumenical movement expanded, divisions increased. Early ecumenical hopes were postponed. Now the WCC faces the double task of helping the churches really to be the church of Jesus Christ by adopting clear positions and still being an integrating force in the disputes that follow. – Five considerations:

1) The basic concept of the WCC as a “fellowship of churches” must constantly be called to the mind of the churches and the general public. The differences with the Roman Catholic Church have to be clearly and frankly discussed. - 2) Three priority themes seem to be demanding attention in the ecumenical movement today: a) the expression and proclamation of the church’s faith; b) commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation; and c) the development of conciliar fellowship among the churches on local, regional and worldwide levels of church life. This concept of conciliarity shows clearly that the goal and the way cannot be separated in the effort for unity. The three themes are to be understood as guidelines that might bring a certain direction into the bewildering confusion of activities today. If the WCC wants to be in effective contact with its member churches, it must be able to show that its activities are centred on a few main priorities. - 3) The WCC, being de facto a fellowship of territorial churches, should take the initiative in developing closer cooperation with the Christian World Communions. National bodies are increasingly unable to cope with the growing number of supranational problems. Besides: How could the WCC represent its members in relation with the Roman Catholic Church if it does not also regard the (other) Christian World Communions as part of its fellowship? - 4) The WCC should in future take better account of the regions. - 5) Finally: Special attention must be given to communication. The WCC has to make clear that - on the basis of its hard-won convictions - it is always willing to engage in frank dialogue with people who take a different view. If it wants to speak representatively, it must work constantly at enlarging the common basis, including new movements which expand beyond confessional and national boundaries.

THE ECUMENICAL FUTURE AND THE WCC

A Dialogue
of Dreams and Visions

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Contents

- | | | | |
|----|--|-----|--|
| 1 | Editorial | 79 | The World Council at the Crossroads? <i>Lewis S. Mudge</i> |
| 4 | A Missionary's Dream
<i>Lesslie Newbigin</i> | 86 | What is the World Council's Oikoumene? <i>Georges Tssetsis</i> |
| 11 | Towards a Self-understanding of the WCC <i>Aram Keshishian</i> | 90 | A Privileged Instrument of the Ecumenical Movement? <i>Lukas Vischer</i> |
| 22 | From Breakthrough to Breakthrough
<i>Patrick G. Henry</i> | 100 | Jesus Christ Who Has Gone to the Utter Periphery <i>Kosuke Koyama</i> |
| 31 | Hopes for Canberra 1991
<i>Johannes W. Hempel</i> | 107 | JPIC and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement <i>Janice Love</i> |
| 37 | The People of God and the Ecumenical Future <i>Jean Mayland</i> | 120 | An Ethics for Sustainability
<i>Wesley Granberg-Michaelson</i> |
| 43 | Whom God Has Joined Together: Churches and Councils of Churches
<i>David M. Gill</i> | 131 | Remembering the Questions
<i>Anthony Ugolnik</i> |
| 50 | The Future of Local Councils of Churches: Some Practical Observations
<i>Diane C. Kessler</i> | 138 | Towards a Common Understanding and Vision <i>Marlin VanElderen</i> |
| 57 | More than Inclusiveness: The New Christian Majority and the Shift in the Ecumenical Conversation about Church Unity <i>John Deschner</i> | 146 | Book Reviews |
| 68 | The Banquet of Ecumenical Theology
<i>Dale T. Irwin</i> | 151 | Books Received |
| | | 153 | Significant Ecumenical Journals |
| | | 158 | Bibliographia Œcumenica |

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A Privileged Instrument of the Ecumenical Movement?

Lukas Vischer

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the question whether the World Council of Churches is still in fact the “privileged instrument” of the ecumenical movement. And if it is not, what can be done to make it so again? Undoubtedly, structural changes are needed and there is no lack of suggestions about how the Council might be restructured in one way or another. It is, however, becoming increasingly apparent that alterations in the organizational structure cannot really do much to change the situation. They may perhaps make the World Council’s work more transparent and effective, but they will do little to remove the real difficulties which the Council has to tackle. The efforts will simply go to prove the inherent truth of the French proverb: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose!*

A new situation

The real question is whether the WCC is still an appropriate body in terms of what is happening in the ecumenical movement today. It is more than forty years since it was founded and much has changed in that time. New factors shape the ecumenical movement today. Yet the World Council has remained by and large the same. It seems reasonable to suggest that the WCC can no longer adequately meet the needs of today because, to a high degree, it institutionalizes a past era of the ecumenical movement. Mere readjustments will not be enough. We have to ask the much more radical question: What would the WCC have to look like if it were being founded today?

The changes cannot be examined in detail here, so a few indications must suffice. First, there is the expansion of the membership and the fact that the number of member

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churches has doubled since 1948, mainly through the addition of the Orthodox churches and many churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Another important aspect is the proliferation of ecumenical structures. Whereas to begin with the WCC was practically the only ecumenical body, many “ecumenical councils” have emerged at both regional and national levels in recent decades. Some of these are associated with the WCC but so far no organic coordination between these councils has come about. For the churches involved, the variety of these ecumenical instruments is confusing; the range of initiatives and programmes to which they are called to respond is in many cases more than they can cope with.

Perhaps the most far-reaching change has been the active participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement. The fact that the Roman Catholic Church did not join the WCC meant that a new pole of international ecumenical initiative developed and claimed the churches’ attention at least as much as the World Council of Churches. An immediate consequence of Roman Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement was the strengthening of the world confessional families or Christian World Communions, as they have now come to be called. These of course existed before the Second Vatican Council, indeed most of them have a longer history than the WCC itself. The founding of the World Council had raised hopes that sooner or later they would become superfluous, but when the Roman Catholic Church took up bilateral conversations at this level, they acquired renewed importance and increasingly developed into independent agencies in the ecumenical movement.

Yet another important change must at least be mentioned here, and that is, the postponing of early ecumenical hopes. When the World Council was founded hopes ran high. Rapprochement, even unity among the churches, was expected in a near future. However, it soon became clear that a long and difficult way lay ahead: the divisions not only ran far deeper than had at first been realized, but actually increased as the ecumenical movement expanded. The WCC was not just an instrument for a short “interim” period between separation and unity, but had to prepare for a long-term existence. It now faces the difficult task of how to foster as wide-ranging a dialogue as possible and, at the same time, by means of clear and forward-looking positions, help the churches really to be the church of Jesus Christ. Adopting positions inevitably leads to arguments and this poses the question how the the WCC can be and remain an integrating force *in* these disputes. Will the churches follow its lead? I think, for instance, of the break with the evangelical camp which took place during the 1960s and 1970s. And conversely, will the positions it adopts be clear enough to enable creative movements to identify with the World Council or see it as a forum for meeting?

The question of the future of the WCC has to be asked against this background. What changes are needed if the World Council is to live up to present conditions? The following five considerations are an attempt to indicate the lines along which, in my view, the answer has to be sought.

1. The WCC – a fellowship of churches

The WCC describes itself in its basis as a “fellowship of churches”. This basic concept must constantly be called to mind. It is a mistake to think it is alive in the mind of the churches and the general public and can therefore be tacitly assumed.

The WCC was founded to show forth the fellowship which already binds the churches together here and now. Underlying its founding is the understanding that the

churches must share their life and witness if they are gradually to grow together into unity. Important as doctrinal and theological conversations are, they are not enough in themselves. The churches must, as it were, “suspend their confessional allegiance” and respond together to the God who is addressing them today. In a sense, the founding of the WCC was the anticipation of a fellowship which did not yet exist — in the confidence that new perspectives and hence new fellowship would open up precisely because of that fellowship.

The WCC is thus a fellowship of still divided churches. These recognize one another as constant partners in prayer, worship, dialogue, witness and practical cooperation. They are still so deeply divided by substantial differences that they are as yet unable to take the step to full mutual recognition. Yet they already belong together now. The WCC is marked on the one hand by the “not yet” of full mutual recognition in Christ, which is the goal of the ecumenical movement, and on the other, by the “already now” of fellowship experienced in prayer, witness and service.

The WCC’s existence is in a way an anomaly. How could it be otherwise? An instrument created because of an anomaly is bound to bear the marks of that anomaly itself. For that very reason it cannot easily be defined ecclesologically. And yet there is no other way from separation to fellowship except the unequivocal affirmation of this provisional “fellowship of churches”. Only as the churches face up to the absolute inconsistency of their present situation and endeavour together to *be* the church of Jesus Christ here and now will closed doors open for them. Sustaining the tension of division *within* the fellowship is the whole secret of the ecumenical movement.

What is involved in calling to mind the basic conception of the WCC?

- It is certainly time the Central Committee tried to define the nature of the WCC in a new common statement. What is meant by “fellowship of churches”? Why is this conception so significant for the churches’ way forward together? How are the way and the goal connected here? What significance — including theological and ecclesiological significance — attaches to the fellowship already experienced by the churches? What opportunities and obligations arise from it?

Some of these questions were answered as early as 1950 in the “Toronto Declaration”. Two years after the founding of the WCC the Central Committee attempted to define the nature of the WCC in relation to the church of Jesus Christ, on the one hand, and to the still divided churches, on the other. This text is still relevant today and there is no need to replace it by a another one. On the basis of this text, however, the WCC urgently needs to define its self-understanding in grappling with the historical facts of today.

One of the tasks of the Commission on Faith and Order, according to its by-laws, is “to study the theological implications of the existence and the development of the ecumenical movement”. Work on this subject is therefore part of its official function.

- Presentation of the basic conception includes a common review of the past. A new history of the ecumenical movement seen as a “fellowship of churches on the way to unity” could contribute substantially to a greater sense of identity with the WCC. For again and again it is apparent how little the churches and the general public actually know about the WCC’s central role in the ecumenical movement. A project of this sort obviously goes far beyond the capacity of the staff. But it is not necessary, nor indeed desirable, for a study of this kind to be done under the direct

supervision of the Geneva staff. The work could be entrusted to a group of historians who are basically friendly to the WCC but at the same time have a certain objectivity towards it.

- Calling the nature of the WCC to mind will inevitably also entail disagreements. Through its very existence the WCC represents a constant challenge to the churches. A new statement on the nature of the WCC would therefore probably lead to extended discussions in the member churches which would themselves be obliged by such a statement to redefine their relation to the ecumenical movement.

This applies particularly to the Roman Catholic Church. Clearly, it cannot wholly share the basic conception of the WCC. It has adopted a curiously ambiguous position. On the one hand, it participates in the ecumenical movement, but at the same time refuses to become a member of the WCC. It is fond of evoking declarations made by the churches in the fellowship of the WCC, especially the statement that membership of the WCC in no way detracts from the integrity of the ecclesiological convictions of all churches, yet it does not itself enter that fellowship. It works loosely with the WCC yet at the same time insists that the WCC is a “human structure” and as such cannot claim ecclesial status. While the Roman Catholic Church preserves its independence, “Rome” and “Geneva” are misleadingly set over against each other. Rome’s continuing absence considerably restricts the concept of the “fellowship of churches on the way to unity”.

Has the time not come for an exhaustive and frank discussion of the differing concepts? Great caution has been exercised in this respect in recent years, probably for fear of upsetting the already fragile balance of relations. Admittedly, in the Joint Working Group founded by the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church in 1965, there has been a regular opportunity for a clarifying exchange of views. The content of these conversations, however, has not on the whole been communicated to outsiders. The Joint Working Group has rather given the public impression of growing agreement. But if the WCC is to continue to play its role in contributing to the ecumenical movement, the differences in the conceptions have to be clearly and frankly discussed. The WCC will be depriving itself of its own future if it evades the disputes arising out of its own self-understanding.

2. Priority to which themes?

Three priority themes seem to be demanding attention in the ecumenical movement today: (a) the expression and proclamation of the church’s faith; (b) commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation; and (c) the development of conciliar fellowship among the churches.

It is important first to specify the thematic priorities which can bring the churches together today. The structures of the WCC must derive from these priorities. From what has been said so far it may be concluded that in the years ahead, the attention of the ecumenical movement should focus on the three themes mentioned above. Why?

a) The expression and proclamation of the church’s faith.

The WCC must become much more than in the past the place where Christian tradition is interpreted and transmitted. More and more Christians are living in a

context of confessional pluralism and need an ecumenical interpretation of the Christian tradition. The ecumenical movement, however, has not hitherto been the place where the great fundamental issues of the Christian faith are discussed. The ecumenical discussion has had a tendency to concentrate either on the controversies between the confessions or on the social and ethical implications of the gospel. The fundamentals of the faith were not as a rule included. These are taken for granted on the assumption that it is the responsibility of each individual church to introduce its people to the Christian faith. This assumption is becoming less and less true as time goes on. The central truths of the faith must be stated today in the ecumenical context.

It would, for instance, be worthwhile to envisage a project for an ecumenical catechism, that is, an attempt to present the great themes of the Christian faith in a way that embraces all the confessions. This does not, of course, mean that something in the nature of a "super-catechism" would emerge under the auspices of the WCC. The faith must be articulated and proclaimed differently according to context. But it should be possible for the WCC to initiate and sponsor a catechetical movement among the churches and encourage appropriate initiatives in each part of the world. The Faith and Order Commission's study on the apostolic faith has already done some good preliminary work which could be a basis for a project of this kind.

b) Justice, peace and the integrity of creation

For some time, and notably since the Vancouver assembly in 1983, the idea of a "conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation" has been in the forefront of attention in the ecumenical movement. How is this process to be assessed? In my view, it is more than just a new theme. The Vancouver assembly's call to the churches is really the expression of a growing awareness that the human race is standing on the threshold of a qualitatively new age. It has acquired the capacity for self-destruction and has entered an era when its survival is at stake. Even if the impending disasters can still be averted for the time being, the capacity for self-annihilation cannot be reversed. This situation confronts the churches with new questions. They have to be clear in their own minds what it means to proclaim the gospel in an age when the issue is survival. This also profoundly affects the ecumenical movement and the direction it takes. The response to the monstrous injustice which is costing millions of lives, the ever-present danger of a nuclear war and the, in human terms, seemingly inevitable destruction of nature by human beings in our technological civilization is more than just a "theme". It is a challenge which sends us back to the deepest resources of the Christian faith. *All* our previous approaches, themes and priorities have to be thought through afresh in the light of this approach.

While the Vancouver proposal met with a ready response in many of the member churches, it got off to a halting and difficult start among the governing bodies and staff of the World Council. For a while it looked as though the Council was not really serious about its own proposal, and the world convocation on "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" which finally came about, took place under such unfavourable conditions that it proved unable to give any clear signal. It would be fatal, however, to measure the relevance of the theme by these shortcomings: the project should not be abandoned but, on the contrary, pursued with renewed vigour.

c) Deepening the conciliar fellowship among the churches

Expression of the faith, commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation — these two aspects must be complemented by patient efforts to deepen the fellowship among the churches. The question of church unity is not a matter for theologians and theological work alone; it extends to all areas of the WCC's work. The concept of "conciliar fellowship" developed in the WCC in the 1970s and 1980s provides a suitable framework for these efforts for deeper fellowship. It is more comprehensive than other concepts that have played a part in the ecumenical discussion on unity. Not only does it give a theological response to the question of the nature of "the unity we seek", it also provides the basis for practical reflection on ways of realizing unity. It has the advantage that it can be applied at the different levels of church life — local, regional and worldwide. But above all it is dynamic because it lets it be clearly seen that the goal and the way cannot be separated in the effort for unity. The goal of "conciliar fellowship" must be lived out in practice now in the "pre-conciliar fellowship" of the WCC. The many different aspects of the Council's activities can each find their place within this framework.

What is the point of stating these three priorities? There is of course no thought of belittling the WCC's activities up till now, nor of suggesting they should be replaced. Rather, these three themes are to be understood as guidelines that might bring a certain direction into the bewildering confusion of activities today. We need to ask how far each one of these activities helps to define and develop these three perspectives, apply them in a specific area or bring them to a specific group of people. All the WCC's different studies and activities came into being at a specific moment in time and inevitably bear the stamp of that time. One or two of them may well have lost their urgency and could perhaps be dropped. But the majority are as relevant as ever. They simply need reinterpreting in the light of the priorities now chosen. If the WCC wants to be in effective contact with its member churches, it must be able to show that its activities are centred on a few main priorities. The variety of the trees must not prevent outsiders from seeing the wood.

3. Relationship with the Christian World Communions

The WCC should take the initiative in developing closer cooperation with the Christian World Communions. A genuine common witness, especially at world level, will only be possible if the world communions are included in the ecumenical movement as partners.

The WCC is de facto a fellowship of territorial churches. With the exception of a tiny minority, its member churches represent a particular country or region. When the founding of the Council was being planned there was even some discussion of the possibility of forming an association at the level of the world confessional families; it was soon discarded, however. The WCC was to be linked as directly as possible with the churches in each country. This concern is undoubtedly still important. Yet that is not all there is to be said. Why?

— First it must be said that the worldwide level of the church's life has been steadily growing in importance in recent decades. More and more decisions cannot be taken at a purely national level. National bodies are increasingly unable to cope with the growing number of supranational problems. This has added to the importance of the WCC. But at the same time the confessional bodies have also

become more important. Alongside the official organizations, a growing number of international associations have been formed to pursue particular concerns at supranational level. If the WCC is to speak and act as representative of the churches at international level it must seek agreement with this variety of organizations. Only if it does so, will it really be heard by its member churches.

- In many cases the Christian World Communions have a membership that is wider than that of the WCC. Some of their member churches either cannot or do not want to belong to the Council. Cooperation with the world communions could considerably widen the WCC's sphere of influence.
- The Roman Catholic Church has enhanced the importance of the Christian World Communions. It is itself a kind of Christian world communion. That being so, it is understandable that it should spontaneously choose the latter as its partners. Since these relations have been built up at international level it is important that an understanding should be reached between the WCC and the world communions. For how could the WCC represent its member churches in relations with the Roman Catholic Church if it does not also regard the worldwide bodies as part of its fellowship? The present situation is unsatisfactory: in their capacity as members of the Christian World Communions the churches are outside the WCC. Closer links with the world communions could at the same time also help to bring a little more clarity to relations with the Roman Catholic Church. It would then be seen that the Roman Catholic Church is a world communion among other world communions. Rome would not to the same extent confront Geneva as the second centre of the ecumenical movement.

How can these closer links be brought about? It would certainly be a disastrous mistake to turn the WCC into a fellowship of world communions. The advantages of the existing conception must not be lost. But some solution must be found to enable a regular exchange of views and constructive cooperation to take place with the Christian World Communions.

4. Closer links with the ecumenical movement at regional level

The WCC's work should in future take better account of the regions. Each region has its own set of questions; each has to develop its own initiatives. The WCC is not in a position to speak and act for all the regions. Its work depends on cooperation with the regional councils. In addition, it must be more attuned to the life and witness of the churches in each individual country.

The principle is not new. The WCC's constitution explicitly states: "The World Council of Churches recognizes regional conferences as essential partners in the ecumenical enterprise" (by-laws IX,1). The relationship between the WCC and the regional councils is one of association. A great deal of exchange takes place. The financial ties that bind them are considerable. And yet the regional councils are still not clearly seen as real partners of the WCC. In the experience of the member churches they are in many respects independent bodies. Unquestionably, if the ecumenical movement is not to disintegrate into a variety of organizations, there must be still closer communication between the WCC and the regional councils. Closer contacts among the regional councils themselves would also be desirable and here the WCC could in a sense act as the link.

- It would be an important step in this direction if the WCC's work were better adapted to the individual regions. The main emphases of the work should always be formulated in a way that takes account of the regions. But each individual WCC programme (Faith and Order, Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, etc.) should also systematically ask itself: what do these insights mean for the regions? And, conversely, what do the insights gained in the regions contribute to the churches' witness worldwide?
- If closer relations with the regions are to be achieved, structural changes are necessary. The WCC should appoint secretaries for the different regions, who should be attached to the General Secretariat. They would be responsible for ensuring a regular exchange of ideas and information with their respective regions. They would have to ensure that the different WCC programmes are harmonized as regards each region. Important as it is that individual programmes should pay attention to the questions in each region, cooperation between the WCC as a whole and the regional councils must nevertheless be negotiated. In the long run the spate of different ideas, questionnaires, appeals and demands pouring out of the WCC's individual programmes has, if anything, a paralyzing rather than a stimulating effect. The regional councils should have a clearly defined partner at the WCC to whom they can turn for information and who will defend their concerns.
- The staff covering the regions would also have to be responsible for contacts with the member churches in the region concerned. It would be their task to ensure that these churches are encouraged to become involved in the WCC's work. The churches' readiness to involve themselves in the Council's work is at present frequently impeded by the fact that it is not clear who exactly is responsible for dealing with the concerns of the individual member churches. Inquiries can of course be addressed to the General Secretariat. But how can the General Secretariat possibly deal fully with the concerns of all the individual member churches! Things cannot be allowed to continue as they are, with churches receiving attention only if a serious crisis occurs.

5. The question of communication

Special attention must be given to communication. The WCC is dependent on the contact with its member churches, and this has to be strengthened, not just maintained. At the same time, the WCC must try constantly to widen the scope of the dialogue among the churches — even across apparently immovable boundaries. Communication through the media is only a fraction of the task involved here. The crucial question is rather how the WCC can initiate processes that will bring about real participation.

The WCC's communication both with its member churches and with the general public is on the whole poor — the verdict is almost unanimous. Why should this be so? It would be facile to place the blame on those directly responsible for communication. Indeed their work is professional and in many respects exemplary. The problem lies deeper than that. The WCC has great trouble convincing the member churches and the public that it really cares about communicating. It faces the difficulty of how a clear and unequivocal stance on the great issues of our times can be combined with a fundamental openness and willingness for dialogue. It has earned itself the widespread

reputation of always being ready to defend certain convictions and therefore being not at all open to dialogue with people who take a different view. Yet it is in the very nature of the WCC to bring Christians of widely differing convictions together. How can this be made clear? Obviously it cannot mean that hard-won convictions should be abandoned for the sake of dialogue. But it certainly may mean that the WCC does have to keep making it clear that it is *always* willing to engage in frank dialogue on the basis of these convictions. Continuing dialogue is an integral part of the WCC's mission. Its communication should be planned and developed with this in mind.

A few examples by way of illustrations:

- *Consultation with the member churches*: well-prepared presentations submitted to the member churches with a request for their response by a certain date could contribute substantially to help them identify more fully with the WCC. Of course, the WCC frequently presents the churches with papers for their opinion, especially in connection with the assemblies; nor is there any lack of inquiries and questionnaires of every sort. But the member churches are rarely given any real opportunity to comment and state their position. As a rule the exchange of views between the WCC and the member churches goes no further than the administrative headquarters. But surveys should as far as possible cover the whole of the churches. The consultation process on the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" convergence texts could serve as a model in this respect. Although it brought to light differences which had not been apparent to everyone, it also contributed to agreement among the member churches. A similar example are the series of surveys carried out by the bishops' conference of the United States on nuclear armaments and economic justice. The unusual impact of these texts depended largely on their broad base of support in the church. Would something similar not be possible in the context of the WCC? Might not this be a way to establish a certain consensus, for instance in relation to the threefold theme of justice, peace and the integrity of creation? If the WCC wants to speak representatively, it must work constantly at enlarging the common basis. Even the attempt at understanding has already a unifying power.
- It is also important that individually and collectively the churches in each country should set up *processes of communication and reception*. There will be no real reception of the ecumenical movement until the churches themselves assume responsibility for it. Could the WCC not develop a series of models for this? Some promising outlines already exist. The "team visits", for example, have sparked off fruitful discussion in some of the churches visited. The visit made by a representative delegation for the purpose of bringing about clearer decisions in the South African conflict has proved helpful in a number of churches. Measures of this kind are still too external really to mobilize the church as a whole. Would it not be possible to hold ecumenical "synods" in the churches from time to time? These could be an opportunity to work on important theological issues, but above all they would be an occasion for reaching agreement on the witness required of the churches today.
- How does the WCC deal with the *new movements which are springing up in the churches*? Nowadays such movements generally expand beyond both confessional and national boundaries within a very short time. In a sense, each of these movements is — in its own field — an "ecumenical movement". This applies to movements as varied as the charismatic movement, the peace movement, human

rights movements, ecological movements, etc. How can the WCC build up constructive relations with them? If the ecumenical movement is not to disintegrate, it is essential that the new movements should not develop parallel to the WCC (and still less in opposition to it), but should as far as possible be given, so to speak, a home in its midst. It should therefore be considered whether movements of this kind could not enter into some sort of formal association with the WCC. This relation could mean that they have the right to second staff to the headquarters in Geneva. Special attention should go to the churches and communities which by definition can find no place in the present structure of the WCC — communities such as the African independent churches or the evangelical movement among the gypsies. Would it not make sense for the WCC to entrust a group of people or an institute with the task of looking after these relations on its behalf?

The proposals outlined here cannot be realized all at once. They can only take shape gradually, and patient negotiations will be needed to reach the goal. It can already be assumed that some aspects will be changed in the course of discussion. At the same time, this process of renewal and restructuring of the WCC will clearly not take place unless the first steps are taken now. It is important, therefore, that the WCC should demonstrate its real intention of going ahead with this through some initial decisions and declarations.