



Lukas Vischer: World Communions, the WCC and the Ecumenical Movement

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2. Historical Context

After a process of re-structuring in the World Council of Churches (WCC), the WCC assembly in Harare 1998 recommended "that a process be initiated to facilitate and strengthen the relationships between the WCC and the Christian World Communions (CWCs)". The question remained open, what had to be done to implement this resolution.

3. Summary

Most of the Christian World Communions (CWCs) are older than the World Council of Churches (WCC). They had been considering their relationship to the whole Christian community before the WCC came into being. The founding of the WCC, however, created a new situation. - Today, after a process of considerable re-structuring in the WCC, the relationship needs rethinking. There are many difficulties in the interaction of Christian World Communions. Every CWC represents a group sui generis of churches. They belong to the same denomination but differ in their understanding of itself and the ecumenical movement. - It was the president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches who brought together CWC representatives to discuss how their common desire to support the ecumenical movement could be implemented. In 1957 the CWC general secretaries met for the first time. From 1958 onwards even representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate joined the conferences, although the status of Orthodoxy remained unclear. And in 1962, the Roman Catholic Church indicated its willingness to enter into ecumenical contacts and invited observers of the world confessional bodies to the Second Vatican Council. As a consequence, however, one confessional body after another engaged in bilateral dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church and among themselves. A critical voice came from the East Asia Christian Conference which rejected the CWCs as being an obstacle in the way of ecumenical fellowship, for they embodied the dominant European and North American identity of Christianity. - Several initiatives and two studies of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order on catholicity and the councils of the ancient church have not succeeded so far in establishing a permanent platform of common reflection and witness.

Five comments concerning the future of the conference of secretaries of CWCs as a platform for ecumenical advance: 1) The conference of CWC general secretaries has to be developed into an instrument for ecumenical consultation and common decision-making. 2) The world communions should systematically think through the question of what it would really mean to apply the 1952 Lund principle "to act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately". 3) In view of the differences between CWCs it should be possible to form a variety of "coalitions" among particular world communions which are part of an agreed overall plan. 4) The question remains to be clarified of how common and binding decisions can be taken by all world communions. 5) All the world communions are bound by the duty of *confessio* in face of the increase of violence against human beings and against nature. Common planning can result in placing the same great challenges of our time simultaneously on the agenda of the WCC and all the world communions.

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World Communion, the WCC and the Ecumenical Movement

Lukas Vischer

What is the role of the “world communions” in the ecumenical movement? How do they relate to the World Council of Churches (WCC)? The question is as old as the WCC itself, indeed it was being asked before the Council was ever founded. Most of the world communions are older than the Council and had been considering the question of their relationship to the whole Christian community before the WCC came into being. However, the founding of the World Council of Churches created a new situation. At first it looked as though this new world body might overshadow the world communions, but it soon became apparent that this was by no means the end of the story. Many aspects of their role in the worldwide fellowship of all the churches remained unclarified and had to be re-examined and discussed from decade to decade. Relations were defined and redefined. No solution fully satisfactory to all parties was ever found, either then or later. Gradually a structure evolved that made a *modus vivendi* possible. Much was left unsaid, and only when the situation had changed so radically that a serious breakdown in communication seemed likely was a new attempt made to clarify relations.

The last two decades have been no exception to this rule. The world communions and the World Council of Churches continue to exist relatively peacefully alongside one another, but almost everyone is aware that the relationship needs rethinking. The role of the world communions has altered once again; the World Council of Churches has gone through a process of considerable re-structuring. Even if some would like to maintain the status quo, it is clear that it has been overtaken by historical developments. If the cohesion of the ecumenical movement is not to be jeopardized, a new – and common – definition has to be found.

The World Council of Churches seems to be aware of this. A resolution passed by the assembly in Harare (1998) refers to the WCC’s responsibility for maintaining the cohesion of the one ecumenical movement. A renewed effort is to be made to find solutions:

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The eighth assembly recommended that a process be initiated to facilitate and strengthen the relationships between the WCC and the CWCs, as called for in the “common understanding and vision” document. The assembly recognizes the unique historical and ecclesiological contribution of the CWCs to the ecumenical movement. The proposed process aims to foster cooperation, effectiveness and efficiency in the quest for visible unity. The assembly noted with appreciation the important work already done by the conference of secretaries of CWCs, and encouraged that this conference be called upon to contribute to this work in the future.¹

What needs to be done, to implement this resolution? A look at the past may help us to identify the necessary steps.

Similar yet not similar

What are world communions? In a text dating from the 1960s they are described as “communions of churches belonging to the same tradition and held together by this common heritage, conscious of living in the same universal fellowship and giving to this consciousness at least some structured visible expression”.²

World communions thus share a universal perspective. They represent a group of churches, they seek to strengthen the fellowship among them and bear witness on their behalf at international level. However, despite having all these features in common, they cannot really be reduced to a common denominator. Depending on their underlying ecclesiology, they have a different self-understanding, a different profile, a different ethos, a different shape and structure.

Every world communion is *sui generis*. Almost all the texts and reports on the relationship of the world communions to the WCC begin with an observation to this effect, and it is very important not to lose sight of this fact. As we try to understand the relationship of the world communions to the WCC and to one another, and to move closer to a solution to the present problems besetting their relationship, we cannot ignore the diversity of the different traditions; for this, ultimately, is the reason behind the many difficulties in their interaction.

The diverse – one might even say contradictory – nature of the different communions is reflected in the fact that it has never been easy to agree on a common designation for them. Known first of all as world confessional bodies, and then as world confessional families, they are now generally called [Christian] world communions. None of these terms applies equally to all these diverse groups of churches. For some of them, such as the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church, the term “communion” is inadequate because they understand themselves as “the church of Jesus Christ”. For others, like the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Baptist Union, the term goes beyond what they can claim for themselves, because they see themselves as a loose federation of churches of the same origin and way of thinking.

Each world communion has its own history, with its roots in different historical epochs. The great schism of 1054 left Christianity divided into two increasingly separate communions. They considered themselves – though in different ways – to be the catholic church of Jesus Christ. Other world communions grew out of the 16th-century Reformation. They were formed in the 19th and 20th centuries as associations of churches belonging to one or other of the Protestant traditions. All the world communions have undergone new developments since the start of the ecumenical movement. Their history is by no means completed. In seeking to come to terms with

the modern world, and by participating in the ecumenical movement, they have acquired new features. The "universe" of the world communions is in a state of flux.

How do they differ? One important aspect is the question of their common basis or common denominator. What do the individual churches see as the bond which holds them together as a world communion? Some put the emphasis chiefly on the doctrine they hold in common, while others see a common structure as far more important for the unity and common witness of the churches involved. Some see their common basis first and foremost in the apostolic heritage, while others look chiefly to the future: they are seeking unity as a universal fellowship by bearing common witness in today's world.

While some take the local church as the primary reality of Christ's church and understand the international fellowship as an association of local churches, others consider that the church has been universal from the very beginning, called into being and constituted by the apostles and their successors as a communion transcending all borders. Conceptions of church government also differ correspondingly: while some favour synodal and collegial forms of government, others assume the need for hierarchical forms of one sort or another.

Reflecting these differences, the various communions hold different views on how decisions are taken and on the weight to be attributed to them. Certain communions seek to make decisions at international level which then, in principle, have to be complied with by members of all the local churches; others consider that, to be valid, decisions must come "from below" and can only be recognized as decisions by the whole church once they have gone through a process of reception by the local churches. This difference plays a major role in dialogue between churches today. The results of doctrinal conversations are inevitably dealt with differently by the different world communions.

Depending on their respective backgrounds, the diverse traditions differ in their understanding of the ecumenical movement. They are guided by different concepts of unity, they set different priorities and emphasize different perspectives. They therefore pursue different strategies: some put all the weight on doctrinal conversations, whereas others see practical cooperation as the most promising path. Some see doctrinal agreement as a precondition for a genuine rapprochement; others think that, while unity clearly presupposes the confession of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it otherwise leaves room for great diversity. In their understanding, then, ecumenical fellowship can therefore be lived and experienced here and now.

These few references will suffice to show that, when it comes to examining relations between the world communions and the WCC, we are dealing with pre-eminently ecclesiological issues. Worldwide communions of churches, with their own understanding of what it means to be the church and their own projects of church life, confront one another in the framework of a wider ecumenical fellowship which is also seeking to bear witness at international level. They can, of course, support one another from their respective backgrounds on pragmatic grounds and strengthen the common witness of the WCC. But as they do so, they will constantly be brought face to face with the fundamental differences that distinguish them from one another. Ultimately, if their witness is to be sustained agreement must be reached on questions of a more fundamental nature.

International associations in the 19th century and their significance for the ecumenical movement

The 19th century marks a new epoch in the history of Protestantism. It was the time when the Protestant churches were becoming increasingly aware of their international calling. An important turning point came with the founding of a number of missionary societies in the late 18th century and early decades of the 19th century. Socially speaking, something like the first stirrings of globalization took place and, as international developments were at that time largely determined by Protestant nations, the Protestant churches found themselves in the forefront of the new outreach. The movement was carried principally by the “evangelical” strand within Protestantism, so the international associations that were founded were also influenced by the spirituality of revival. Although, initially, the central focus was on the missionary task, it soon became a question of gathering together those of like mind across national boundaries, helping to usher in a more humane world through common witness.

Associations of various kinds were founded in the 19th century. First we should mention the three great youth or lay movements which paved the way for the modern ecumenical movement: the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA, 1844),³ the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA, 1855) and the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF, 1890). All three sought to bring together individual Christians, whether young people or laity. They cannot therefore be called world communions, which are by definition composed of churches, but they did make a deep impact on the life of the churches. It was partly thanks to them that, for many Protestant Christians, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, the barriers between the separate denominations became porous. In the 20th century, the World Student Christian Federation in particular has formed significant links with the Orthodox world. Perhaps the most important thing, however, is that all three organizations gave Protestant Christians an opportunity to develop a sense for the problems and perspectives of the international world.

The three organizations played an important part in the history of the World Council of Churches. At the time of its founding they were rightly known as its “major allies”.⁴ Many leading ecumenical personalities came from the ranks of these three movements and, for a long time, experience in the WSCF was considered as a natural recommendation for candidates applying for a staff post in the WCC. Their attitude was marked by two things. On the one hand, they brought with them the typical spirituality of revival, with a somewhat sceptical attitude towards the constituted church; and, on the other, they were open to any movement of renewal in the churches. Ruth Rouse described the position as follows:

Despite certain misgivings on the part of some association leaders, there has been a general acceptance and welcome of the World Council of Churches by the lay movements...the lay movements... are convinced of the continuing contribution they have to bring to general ecumenical movements, and they seek to make this contribution in harmony with the desires of the churches. The ecclesiastically constituted bodies have high regard for the ecumenical achievements of the lay movement.⁵

The Evangelical Alliance (1846)⁶ was of a different stamp. Founded for the purpose of affirming the faith and beliefs of the revival movement across denominational and national boundaries, it too was an association of individuals; 800 Christians of different denominations took part in its founding assembly in London. Its common bond

was the evangelical faith understood as the core of the reform movement. Where the lay movements sought an opening to the Orthodox world, the Evangelical Alliance confined itself to its own original ecclesial context. Then, as now, one of its distinguishing features was clear demarcation vis-a-vis the Roman Catholic Church. Evangelical organizations such as the World Evangelical Fellowship can rightly claim this heritage.

It was against this background that the first confessional associations in the Protestant world emerged in the second half of the 19th century. A series of them were founded, beginning in 1867 with the gathering of Anglican bishops known as the Lambeth conference. The World Presbyterian Alliance and the International Congregational Council followed in 1875 and 1891.⁷ The Methodist churches formed a conference in 1881, and 1905 saw the founding of the World Baptist Union. Perhaps the youngest grouping is the Lutheran World Federation (1923/1947).⁸

The founding of all these bodies had been preceded by the First Vatican Council, and the declaration on the universal jurisdiction and infallibility of the pope in 1871. By this step, the Roman Catholic Church had drawn the boundaries of the church more narrowly than ever before. We may even say that, with the Council's decisions, it became the most influential confessional body among all Christian traditions. For the Roman Catholic Church and, to some extent, also for the other Christian churches, the century that followed was to become a "confessional" or "confessionalistic" age. In 1889, in protest, and as a counterfoil to the perspectives of the First Vatican Council, the Union of Utrecht (the regular assembly of Old Catholic bishops) was formed.

It will be clear from this picture that the confessional associations were not inspired by the same spirit as the lay movements. What they had in common was the intention to break through national boundaries, and to enable their member churches to bear common witness at the international level. They were concerned for the churches' solidarity with one another and with the world, but their main concern was that the churches should gather together on the basis of their common heritage and assert themselves on the international scene. Basically, they were pursuing the same goals for the churches of their own tradition as the WCC was to pursue for the churches of all traditions. Their relationship to the WCC was therefore bound to be ambivalent from the start. For one thing, they were operating at the same level of church witness and found themselves compelled to bear common witness in a world that was growing steadily smaller. For another, with the founding of the WCC, they felt themselves challenged in their deepest *raison d'être*, namely the renewal and representation of their confessional heritage.

The history of relations since the founding of the WCC

Discussions in the preparatory phase

The answer to the question of how the WCC should be structured was not immediately clear. How were the different traditions to be represented in the new interconfessional organization? There was much to be said for the "territorial principle", as it was called at that time – in other words, the direct membership of national churches. It was thought that membership by way of confessional world bodies would hamper initiative, and the exchange of views among the churches. The World Council of Churches was to be built up "from below". Through it, the individual churches should

be able to experience the worldwide fellowship at first hand. From Lutheran and Baptist quarters it was objected that this structure did not take the confessional allegiance of the different churches seriously enough.⁹ They pleaded for the confessional traditions as a whole to be given a firm place in the structure.

The territorial principle carried the day, although it was stated that the confessional principle was to be duly recognized. A series of measures was taken to maintain the balance between the two "principles", including, for instance, conditions of membership (minimum number of members, allocation of seats on governing bodies and others).¹⁰

However, relations among the parties concerned were by no means settled. The great question was whether the expectations linked to the founding of the World Council would (or indeed ever could) be fulfilled. Could churches of different confessional traditions conceivably form a worldwide fellowship? Could they possibly bear common witness over and beyond the differences that still persisted? Was it realistic to expect that the churches' common basis would be so consolidated through theological conversations and, above all, through shared experience, that their confessional allegiance would lose its importance in the foreseeable future? The mood after the second world war tended in this direction. The traditions were shaken. The churches were unavoidably confronted with the task of witnessing to "God's design" amidst "man's disorder".¹¹ Surely, then, confessional allegiances had to take a back seat? The founding of the Church of South India in 1947 was taken as a sign that the Protestant churches, at least, were able to unite. The Roman Catholic Church, of course, did not come into the picture; it had, after all, expressly withheld itself from the ecumenical movement.

The attitude of the world communions at the time of the WCC's founding

The founding of the World Council certainly did not mean that the world confessional bodies had no further role to play. Although it is true that, in the 1950s, the WCC and its activities commanded most attention, in the period after the second world war almost all the confessional traditions were gradually developing their structures. In 1947 the Lutheran World Convention, formed in 1923, was transformed into the Lutheran World Federation. In 1958 the Lambeth conference was given a permanent secretariat, and other world bodies also consolidated their activities. The challenges of international witness were too strong not to require a more systematic response from the world confessional bodies as well. The scale of development varied; while the Lutheran World Federation soon developed into an organization on a par with the World Council, the development of other confessional bodies remained much more modest.¹²

The confessional bodies differed in their relationship to the WCC. Although all of them affirmed their readiness to be involved in the ecumenical movement and to encourage their member churches to engage in ecumenical cooperation, they set different emphases when implementing this intention. While some placed more importance on the unity and common witness of their own tradition and set their priorities accordingly, others were more intent on working as closely as possible with the WCC. This difference was particularly evident in the case of the two world bodies which established their headquarters in Geneva and carried out their activities in direct proximity to the WCC, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Alliance of

Reformed Churches (WARC). Franklin Clark Fry, president of both the LWF and of the WCC's central committee, was still able to say: "The strongest existing realities outside our individual churches are the ties which unite us with our fellow confessors of the Augsburg Confession; all over the world our primary Christian loyalties are not geographical but confessional."¹³ It is not surprising, therefore, that heading the list of objectives the Lutheran World Federation set for itself, we find: "to bear united witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ as the power of God for salvation; and to cultivate unity of faith and confession among the Lutheran churches of the world". The World Alliance of Reformed Churches chose another option. Its executive committee declared in Basel in 1951: "Just as it is the true nature of the Christian church to be an instrument of God's glory, it is the true nature of Presbyterianism never to be merely an end in itself, but to serve the church universal of Jesus Christ." This led the general council in Princeton in 1954 to draw the following conclusion: "In the present ecumenical situation, characterized by a potent movement towards ecumenical understanding and unity, the Alliance desires to collaborate closely with the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council as the main organizational expressions of that movement."¹⁴ The difference is not fortuitous. It has its roots in the different underlying ecclesiological options: whereas the Lutheran churches consider it as their primary task to bring into the ecumenical movement the treasure of the gospel recognized anew in the 16th century, the Reformed churches are to a higher degree turned towards the future and live in the expectation that God will constantly reconstitute his church.

Other world confessional bodies expressed positions similar to that of the Reformed Alliance, albeit with their own particular emphases.¹⁵ The fact that the relationship of the confessional bodies to the WCC was not uniform is not without significance. The differences made themselves felt in the WCC's work. Almost inevitably, those traditions which were prepared "to swing their full power behind the World Council of Churches"¹⁶ acquired greater influence in its work than those which maintained their independence and held their distance, whether for spiritual or geographical reasons. It is no mere chance that the first four general secretaries of the WCC were either Reformed or Methodist.

Amsterdam and after

In a preview of the Amsterdam assembly, H.P. van Dusen wrote:

Much the most explosive issue, and one which is most likely to emerge with some sharpness on the floor of the assembly, exists within the present of membership of the Council – it is the question whether the major loyalty and affiliation of any particular church, after its over-arching loyalty to the universal church of Christ, should be to the neighbour churches of the same country or area, or to sister churches of the same historical family – it is the issue of regionalism or nationalism versus denominationalism or confessionalism.¹⁷

Contrary to van Dusen's expectations, no explosion took place in Amsterdam. His analysis was correct, however, to the extent that the issue remained unclarified – even though, given the rapid development of the WCC's activities, further clarification was obviously called for.

The initiative towards this came from the world confessional body which had identified itself most resolutely with the WCC, the World Alliance of Reformed

Churches. John Mackay, president of the International Missionary Council (1945-51), president of Princeton Theological Seminary (1947-58) and president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1954-59), was the moving force behind the search for new solutions. He had the foresight to realize that the WCC and the confessional bodies could not simply exist in parallel, but had to interact with one another. He was concerned about the resurgence of denominationalism. The statement by the executive committee of WARC in Basel in 1951 (almost certainly drafted by him) says:

If the great world denominations, the Reformed churches among them, pursue world denominational pre-eminence and make their great world bodies ends in themselves, they will betray Jesus Christ. But if they desire, and succeed in their desire, to make the denominational emphasis an enrichment of the common evangelical heritage, they will, by so doing, fulfil the designs of the one Head of the church and be true organs of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

Whether his view that denominationalism was once again on the increase was correct, or whether this was simply a dimension of church reality that had not been sufficiently taken into account, is a matter for discussion. Whatever the case, Mackay was determined that the world communions should come together for regular conversations within the wider framework of the ecumenical movement.

He managed to have a recommendation to this effect adopted at the second assembly of the WCC:

It may be noted with satisfaction that almost all world confessional associations have gone on record as wishing to support the ecumenical movement, and it is suggested that the general secretary shall arrange for informal consultations from time to time, with three or four representatives from each association, to discuss the implementation of that desire and other common problems.¹⁹

Mackay continued to pursue the idea. He persuaded the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (meeting in Prague in 1956) to adopt a resolution expressing the hope "that in the near future an informal gathering can be arranged between representatives of the several world confessional bodies in the Protestant family of churches".²⁰ A year later he took the initiative of inviting representatives of the different world confessional organizations to a short meeting during the session of the WCC central committee (Yale 1957). Not long after, in November of the same year, the general secretaries of the different world confessional bodies met for the first time. On the urging of the general secretary of the WCC, the general secretaries of the Lutheran and the Reformed world bodies had issued the invitation, thus laying the foundation for regular meetings of the world confessional bodies within the ecumenical movement. Another meeting was held in the following year (1958) during the meeting of the central committee in Nyborg. The series of meetings of the general secretaries and the staff was continued year by year.

What did this achieve? Mackay had great hopes for this new institution. This is how he put it a few years later, in 1962:

There was until that time no way of knowing what were the aims, objectives and trends of the confessional movement as a whole. This knowledge could be obtained only if confessional leaders met together for the exchange of information and the discussion of policies in an atmosphere of Christian confidence.²¹

What he wanted was no more and no less than a forum at which major issues of concern to the ecumenical movement could be discussed. But could this be done at luncheon meetings between 12.00 and 15.00 during meetings of the WCC central committee, or at short working sessions of the general secretaries and the staffs of the world associations?

Given the role it was meant to fulfil, such a conference among the confessional bodies was an inadequate instrument from the start. More systematic thinking and planning, as well as greater representativity, were needed to clarify the relationship among the bodies concerned and to develop new forms of cooperation. For example, the discussions should have involved not just the staff of the world associations, but also their decision-making bodies. (True, "expanded consultations" were held at intervals – 1965, 1973, 1974 and 1978 – but they too failed to set on foot a coherent process of mutual consultation and integration.) The relationship with the WCC's Orthodox member churches also remained unclear. From 1958 onwards the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate attended the conferences. But an underlying question remained: Was Orthodoxy a world confessional body, or did it belong to a different category?

The hesitancy about tackling the question is striking. The relationship between the world confessional bodies and the WCC was, indeed, considered an "explosive issue" and was handled very circumspectly. Visser 't Hooft was glad to be able to leave the initiative of the first meeting in Yale to John Mackay, and to be present only as a "guest observer".²² Clearly, sensitivities were to be reckoned with on all sides; how could these be dealt with constructively? Reviewing this series of meetings leaves the impression that the debates and discussions were often broken off too soon. The conference served to keep relations between the partners alive without really reflecting on all the issues, aspects and dimensions of the problems involved.

The voice of the South

In November 1961 the debate received new impetus from outside. At its meeting in Bangalore, immediately before the WCC's third assembly in New Delhi, the expanded continuation committee of the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC) drafted a critical statement about the role of the world confessional bodies in the ecumenical movement. The text was well-balanced but the criticism was implacable: basically, the question at issue was how far the churches of the South had the right and the freedom to constitute themselves as churches in their own context. While duly acknowledging the historical importance of the confessional traditions, the EACC saw the world confessional organizations, with their structures and activities, as a definite obstacle in the way of ecumenical fellowship.

However much good will may be behind the activities, it nevertheless seems that the form of expression of worldwide confessionalism in ever more complicated bureaucratic apparatuses will result in perpetuating and strengthening paternalism and exercising continued control.²³

The EACC statement altered the coordinates of the debate. It was no longer simply a question of general "principles", whether territorial or confessional, but of the relation between the churches in the North and in the South. While for the churches in the South the WCC was the symbol of a new ecumenical future, the confessional asso-

ciations seemed, in their eyes, to embody the dominant European and North American identity of Christianity. The confessional bodies represented the historical reality from which the churches in the South had to liberate themselves in order to attain greater freedom. The leadership of these bodies at that time was still very much in the hands of the "old" Christian world, more so than was the case with the WCC. Confrontation was inevitable.

The subject was also taken up at the New Delhi assembly. Of particular importance was the attempt to define more precisely "the unity we seek" in the ecumenical movement. A statement prepared in advance was adopted, placing all the emphasis on realizing church unity at the local level: all "in each place" who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour should form a "fully committed fellowship". In effect, this emphasis gave a programmatic character to an insight that had frequently been voiced concerning the relationship to the confessional organizations: the prime importance of the missionary task of the local congregation. The assembly was well aware of the challenge this posed to the confessional families. It said:

The critical question is whether or not the leaders of confessional bodies agree with the emphasis we have already made upon the centrality of unity of all Christians in each place, which must, of course, always seek to be a unity in the truth. If they agree, they will not consider the union of one of their churches as a loss, but as a gain for the whole church; and service can be rendered to such churches if the confessional bodies assist them in the responsible study of all issues which are involved in a proposed union.²⁴

The EACC's statement led to a lively debate. The questions it raised dominated the agenda in the next two years. In 1963, the WCC organized a conference to discuss the theme "Freedom and Responsibility for Confession and Unity in the Indigenous Church". The EACC itself returned to the subject in milder terms at its assembly in Bangkok in February 1964. In the statement we find comments like:

The churches in Asia must resist the temptation to maintain theological positions simply to be in good standing with their parent church of the West.

With the development of autonomy among the churches of Asia, new methods must be devised to maintain the relation of fellowship and mutual help which existed between them and their parent churches. This would also lead to a new role for the world confessional organizations. What is important is that all new developments of this nature should be provided from within a multilateral instead of a unilateral pattern.

We appeal to the world confessional organizations that, instead of planning specialized meetings on (contemporary) issues, they support the ecumenical programmes that are developing for the handling of these issues.²⁵

That was as far as the debate went. Its most important consequence was that the world bodies had to do some fresh thinking about the universality to which they laid claim. Efforts were made in almost all the world associations to include more effectively the churches of the South in their work. In the next two decades their staff became increasingly representative, and their assemblies began to be held in the continents of the South. The world confessional bodies thus became more universal.

4 April 1962

One of the most momentous gatherings held by the world confessional bodies was undoubtedly the conference in April 1962. The Second Vatican Council had been

announced. The Roman Catholic Church had indicated its willingness to enter into ecumenical contacts. The churches separated from Rome were to be invited to send observers to the Council. How was this to be done? Conversations between Mgr Jan Willebrands of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and W.A. Visser 't Hooft led to the invitation being sent to the world communions. The Vatican was anxious to know in advance whether the invitation would be accepted by them. Willebrands therefore made contact with a number of churches. To make his job easier, Visser 't Hooft offered to present the plans for the Second Vatican Council at the conference of the world confessional organizations, and to find out in conversation with their representatives whether there was any interest in sending observers. In the event, the invitation was accepted by almost all of them.

Most of those involved in the meeting did not immediately realize the implications of the decision that had been taken. The world confessional bodies gained new importance. They received the reports of their observers and were responsible for interpreting them. Even during the Council, questions were already beginning to be asked about how relations with the Roman Catholic Church would be structured in the future. One confessional body after another decided to engage in bilateral dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. The Lutheran World Federation led the way and the others followed suit, some enthusiastically, others after some hesitation. By the end of the 1970s a broad network of bilateral dialogues had developed.

In this way, a completely new situation emerged. Increasingly, the world confessional bodies became the partners of the Roman Catholic Church. Having once been regarded as an obstacle to ecumenical fellowship, they now became agents of the ecumenical movement. This development has altered the nature of the world communions more than any other, so much so that the world communions of the 1980s and 1990s were no longer the same kind of bodies as they were after the second world war.

In an initial phase, it seemed as though the decisive role in relations with the Roman Catholic Church would continue to lie with the WCC. As early as February 1965, that is, even before the end of the Second Vatican Council, the Joint Working Group between the Holy See and the WCC was set up, and until the end of the 1960s there was even talk of the possibility of the Roman Catholic Church joining the WCC. Serious conversations took place but it soon became apparent that there would be no question of membership. Thereafter, the link continued to be maintained by the Joint Working Group.

This changed radically the relationship between the confessional bodies and the WCC, in that the former were now the privileged partners of a church which did not belong to the WCC. Or, to put it another way, a new world communion, the Roman Catholic Church, had entered the ecumenical movement without becoming a member of the WCC. The WCC's claim to provide the overall framework for the ecumenical movement could no longer be taken for granted. Both sides – the confessional bodies and the WCC – had to redefine their positions and rethink the relations between them.

Strangely enough, it was a long time before the change was examined and considered jointly by the world communions. The agenda of the annual conferences continued, as before, to deal with the issues that had usually been discussed. True, there was some discussion of first experiences in the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, but the deeper issues raised by the new situation were not immediately broached. The

conferences contented themselves with issuing bland statements, almost as though they were not yet ready to face up to the real implications of the changed ecumenical situation.²⁶

All in each place? All in all places?

As we have seen, the assembly in New Delhi adopted a statement on “the unity we seek” which placed all emphasis on local fellowship. It was clear to many even at the time that, as true as this emphasis was, this was not all there was to be said. Sooner or later some indication would have to be given as to how the churches planned to give visible expression to their universal fellowship. The Second Vatican Council represented a challenge to all Christian traditions in this respect – and for the WCC, too, it raised the question of what the World Council could contribute to realizing worldwide fellowship among the churches. The statement about “all in each place” had inevitably to be followed by a statement about “all in all places”.²⁷

First steps in this direction had already been taken in the 1960s by the commission on Faith and Order. A study group, which had the participation of Roman Catholic theologians, had been working on the theme of the catholicity of the church. This spadework enabled the Uppsala assembly (1968) to adopt a report on the subject. Still more important was a second initiative, for a study on the significance of the councils of the ancient church for the ecumenical movement.²⁸ The purpose of this was to gain clarity about what a “truly ecumenical council” should look like. It had already been obvious in Uppsala that this path had to be pursued,²⁹ and intensive work was done on the topic in the years that followed. Gradually, the notion emerged that the ecumenical movement could be understood as a “conciliar fellowship”, that is, a fellowship of churches seeking to create amongst themselves the conditions for convening a “truly ecumenical council”. The statement by the Nairobi assembly (1975) is the fruit of this reflection.³⁰

This process also had repercussions on the WCC’s relations with the world confessional bodies, as it became clear that the latter had a crucial role to play “on the way to an ecumenical council”. If this goal was ever to be achieved, the WCC and the confessional bodies had to cooperate more closely. The tensions, or even confrontation, between them had somehow to be overcome; it had generally to be understood that the WCC and the confessional bodies were part of the same ecumenical reality.³¹ Instead of being dismissed as “bulwarks of denominationalism”, they needed to be involved in the building up of the ecumenical fellowship of the future. Each of the world communions has its own ideas about the universal *communio* of the church and how it is to be brought about; each must feed its ideas into the ecumenical discussion. Christian unity will only become a reality if the different views can gradually be brought closer together.

This discussion was all the more important because the world confessional families were also facing new and related questions. What constitutes *their* identity? Even as they tried to affirm themselves as world bodies, new elements were added to their self-understanding. Their involvement in dialogue obliged them to do some fresh thinking about how binding decisions can be reached at the international level. But, above all, all the world confessional families became aware of the growing diversity in their own midst. The verdict of a WCC document dating from the 1970s is very much to the point:

There are differences of culture, race, language, etc. which resulted from the worldwide nature of the families of churches. There are also conflicting theological emphases within many of the WCFs, including groupings along “evangelical”, “charismatic” and “social involvement” lines... Because of this fact... it is no longer possible to think of the WCFs as being “monolithic” in their identity.³²

A debate about ways and means of decision-making at the universal level did not, therefore, need to be confined simply to comparing traditional positions, but could start from experiences and insights that had not hitherto come into play.

In order to take this conversation further, a framework wider than the annual conference of world communions had to be found. The Roman Catholic Church had to be drawn into the exchange. (If it had become a member of the WCC, exchange and confrontation would have taken place quite naturally.) In 1968, a new opportunity opened in the context of the Faith and Order commission. At the Uppsala assembly Roman Catholic theologians had been appointed as full members of the commission. At the same time, the world communions were invited to send “fraternal delegates” to represent them on the commission. This made it a platform where the full range of the theological and ecclesiological issues facing the ecumenical movement could be discussed.

The WCC tried repeatedly to create a framework for cooperation in other areas of activity – for instance, SODEPAX in the sphere of the church’s witness in society. Perhaps the most spectacular initiative was the Vancouver assembly’s appeal to all the churches (1983) to engage in a conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. But none of these moves succeeded in establishing a permanent platform of exchange, common reflection and joint witness among all those involved, including the Christian world communions.

A new round of reflection and talks

Against this backdrop of developments in the WCC, new attempts were made in the 1970s to clarify relations. The initiative came from the commission on Faith and Order. At a consultation on “Concepts of Unity and Models of Union” in Salamanca (1973), the need for new conversations was once again raised.³³ The conference of general secretaries took the reminder seriously: at their annual meeting in November 1973 they stated: “We recognize a new need for cooperation between the WCFs themselves and the WCC.”³⁴

In preparation for the assembly in Nairobi (1975), an expanded conference of the world confessional families was held in Geneva in November 1974. It had been convened in order to interpret the “new situation” that had developed in the past ten years and to propose joint solutions. A report entitled “The Ecumenical Role of the World Confessional Families in the One Ecumenical Movement” was approved and sent to all the world bodies for their comments and reactions. On the basis of the findings of this survey, a paper was submitted to the Nairobi assembly, which largely approved it, so giving the signal for a new round of talks.

The key sentence in the report states: “These developments seem to indicate that, though the purposes of the WCC and the world confessional families are different, a constructive and complementary way of contributing to the advance of the ecumenical movement can be found.”³⁵ The report then explicitly notes that the world confessional families have played an increasingly important role in the ecumenical movement, and

face the challenge of an even more important role in the future. It expresses the hope that there will be fuller cooperation between the WCFs and the WCC, and that the "Lund dictum" ("to act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately") may be applied. The wish is expressed that WCFs should make more use of the WCC as a forum or instrument for common action, and proposes that further joint study should be undertaken on the theme of "the unity we seek". Finally it suggests that "ongoing vehicles of consultation" should be created in order to implement all these recommendations.

The discussions were continued after the assembly. The issues addressed in the Nairobi report were taken up again at the conference of the world confessional families in 1976. In the hope of achieving concrete results, a text was prepared in the WCC for the attention of the executive committee, essentially re-formulating the content of the Nairobi report. The executive committee approved this text in February 1977 and encouraged the staff to hold further conversations with the world confessional families, both jointly and individually. An expanded conference was held in October 1978³⁶ and its report was submitted to the WCC central committee in January 1979. The insights and suggestions that had been made on previous occasions were once again endorsed. The general secretary was instructed

to explore maintaining and strengthening appropriate liaison with such WCFs as may be interested in building closer overall relationships, and to make maximum use of existing constitutional provisions for WCF involvement in developing WCC policies. It also noted that relations with the world confessional families required "regular attention".³⁷

What did this new round of talks achieve? It is true that a new form of interaction between the WCC and the world organizations did develop in the 1970s. On the part of the WCC, in particular, there was a clear will to strengthen cooperation. Yet the texts dating from that time leave an impression of ambivalence. Despite all the declarations of intention, very little is said about new measures. Questions are raised, but anyone expecting to find answers in the ensuing report will be disappointed. Resolutions are adopted that no one, it seems, really believes will be implemented. It is as though both sides lacked the strength – or perhaps the will – to act upon them.

The forum on bilateral conversations

One proposal was implemented, however; this was the forum on bilateral conversations. The 1970s saw a rapid increase in the number of bilateral dialogues. World confessional bodies were holding theological conversations not only with the Roman Catholic Church but also among themselves. First results had been achieved, and it was clear that this work would be increasingly important in the wider ecumenical discussion. It was also clear that the different bilateral conversations could lead to complications: for example, a rapprochement between one confessional tradition and another could cast a shadow on existing relations. It seemed that some kind of overall agreement was needed. Could unnecessary overlaps be avoided through an exchange of views? Might it be possible to develop common perspectives that would be helpful to all the partners in these conversations? Work on the convergence texts on baptism, eucharist and ministry was then in progress. Among other things, this was an attempt to incorporate into a "multilateral text" insights emanating from bilateral conversations and, conversely, to feed common (multilateral) insights into the latter.

Again, the initiative for this came from the commission on Faith and Order (1973). It was welcomed by the conference of world confessional families in 1974, and the WCC assembly in Nairobi likewise gave its approval.³⁸

However, implementation proved anything but easy. In 1976, a small “consultative” meeting was held to define the project for a forum on bilateral conversations in more detail and to formulate its mandate. Two objections were raised, notably on the Roman Catholic side, voicing the fear that the forum could become an institution that would limit the freedom of decision of the partners in the conversations. It was important, therefore, to avoid any impression that the forum could exercise any form of control over the course of the talks, or have the right to pass judgment on any of the results. The new gathering was to be – quite deliberately – described as a “forum” and not a commission or consultation. The second objection was the familiar one that is always put forward when a proposal is not welcome: voices warned against creating yet more “new structures” when so many groups and commissions were already at work.

The mandate finally agreed upon – carefully covering all sides in the discussion – was as follows:

- to facilitate the exchange of information among the bilaterals;
- to review recent developments in bilateral conversations;
- to continue the discussion on themes of common interest;
- to promote interaction between bilateral and multilateral conversations;
- to study the implications of bilateral findings for the ecumenical movement as a whole;
- to examine issues of method relevant to all bilateral conversations.

It was also decided that the forum should not be seen as a permanent ecumenical structure but as an ad hoc instrument.

The first meeting of the forum took place in 1978, with two meetings following at short intervals. The exchange proved sufficiently fruitful to continue the series. Issues of central importance were addressed. The second and the fourth forum (Bossey 1979 and 1985) dealt with the interaction between multilateral and bilateral conversations in the reception process of the convergence text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*; the fifth forum (Budapest 1995) attempted a general evaluation of bilateral conversations; the theme of the sixth meeting (Bossey 1990) was reception and the seventh (Annecy 1997) studied the implications of the unity statement of the WCC Canberra assembly for the ecumenical movement. The eighth meeting (Annecy 2001) took up again the issue of reception and sought, in particular, to clarify how the various partners in dialogue could act more effectively together.³⁹

And what of today?

The conference of general secretaries of the world confessional bodies has survived since 1957, and has no doubt rendered valuable services during that time. Most of all, it has ensured a regular exchange of information and, from time to time, the discussions have given rise to common action.

But have the original hopes for this body been met? Has the conference become a place where the great problems of the ecumenical movement are thrashed out? This seems doubtful. The conference is organized in a way that prevents it from the outset from fulfilling such hopes. There are two obstacles, the first being that nothing at all is foreseen in the way of programmatic work. As we have stressed, the world commun-

ions differ in doctrine, spirituality and practice and some of them have only tenuous links with the ecumenical movement. While some would be able to work constructively together, others have too few points of contact to be able to form a real working fellowship. The second obstacle lies in the fact that – contrary to the original intention – representation is restricted to the staff of the world communions. In order to do work leading to serious results, the *governing bodies* of the world communions would have to be involved in the exchange.

Developments in the WCC must also be noted at this point. In the last decade the WCC has gone through a process of self-definition. In July 1989, the central committee decided to begin a study on (a) “a common understanding and vision of the WCC; (b) the relationship of the WCC to its member churches; (c) the relationship of the WCC to non-member churches and other Christian groups”.⁴⁰ The issues raised were to be discussed at the seventh assembly in Canberra (1991) and further developed at the world conference on Faith and Order in 1993. It was hoped that the central committee in 1995 could then adopt a concise affirmation, before going on to discuss the implications of these reflections for the constitution of the WCC. However, the undertaking proved more complicated and time-consuming than had originally been foreseen. It was brought to a provisional conclusion only at the eighth assembly in Harare.

The matter of the relationship to the world communions was on the agenda from the start.⁴¹ However, the document (September 1997) summarizing the findings of the process contains only a short paragraph on relations with the world communions. These are mentioned in the chapter on “relationships with partners in the ecumenical movement, churches outside of WCC membership and other bodies”. Under the subtitle “Other Bodies” we then read the following:

An important relationship is that between the WCC and the diverse bodies known generally as Christian world communions. Again, these relationships should be marked by mutual accountability and reciprocity, and the Council should seek ways to share tasks and resources with these partners in the ecumenical movement. Such sharing is particularly important for those bodies which understand themselves as one worldwide communion of churches and of which most if not all members are also members of the WCC. Ways should be found to associate such bodies more directly with the organized life of the WCC. A strong relationship between the WCC and these bodies can be enriching for both, strengthening the sense of the latter that they are part of the worldwide fellowship of Christians and reminding the churches in the World Council that ecumenical commitment can be nourished by rootedness in an ecclesial tradition.⁴²

On the face of it, the paragraph seems fairly non-committal. Nor does the resolution of the WCC assembly in Harare (1998), quoted towards the beginning of this article, add much. It repeats the much-canvassed view that the WCC and the world communions are part of the one ecumenical movement, and that the inter-relationship which exists between them must be more constructively expressed. Nevertheless, the document leaves in no doubt the fact that a new departure is *needed*.

I should like now to make five comments concerning the future of the conference of secretaries of world communion as a platform for ecumenical advance:

1. Ecumenical initiatives have proliferated in recent decades. Where once all paths seemed to converge on the WCC, today a great many actors are present on the ecumenical scene. The picture has become very complicated. How do all these conversations, dialogues, agreements, statements, common actions fit together into a coherent whole?

Can we simply assume that an “invisible hand” will cause the ecumenical movement to grow into the *communio* that God wants? We do, of course, trust in an invisible hand: all our plans are but fragmentary and can be turned in unexpected directions by unexpected events. We do rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide history. But that still leaves us with the question of how the many ecumenical initiatives can be so *directed* that they serve the same goal. For this to happen there has to be a place not just for discussion and reflection, but also for common decision-making. What is needed is some sort of Archimedean point outside the universe of ecumenical actors, and as long as no such place exists we cannot expect to see orderly progress in the ecumenical movement. The oppositions and contradictions within the movement are increasing; the movement together needs to find its new coherence. Or is it just to be left to one church – the Roman Catholic Church, to be more exact – to serve as the Archimedean point?

If progress is to be made, therefore, the conference of general secretaries of world communions has to be developed into an instrument for ecumenical consultation and common decision-making. Whether this is established within the WCC, in proximity to it, or separate from it is not the point. It is not a question of enhancing the WCC’s – or anyone else’s – prestige. The need for comprehensive planning and coordination arises from the facts of life in the ecumenical movement today. It would certainly make more sense for such a body to have close links with the WCC, if only to avoid unnecessary overlaps. But, basically, the most important thing is that the world communions should together assume their responsibility as actors in the ecumenical movement.

2. The idea that the world communions should apply the “Lund dictum” to collaboration among themselves has cropped up in many documents since the 1970s.⁴³ In fact, the world communions do pursue the same or similar aims in many spheres, and they also cooperate regularly with other world communions or the WCC. But have they ever systematically thought through the question of what it would really *mean* to apply the Lund dictum? Models exist here and there, notably in cooperation in the field of human rights. A more complete survey would no doubt bring to light other areas in which common witness is possible.

3. The WCC’s “Common Understanding and Vision” document rightly points out that the world communions differ from one another, and that it is not possible for all to work together in every case. Obviously, it is desirable for ecumenical witness to be as broadly based as possible, and there is undoubtedly a wide measure of agreement on fundamental social issues. The question is more whether, and to what extent, the possibility of consensus has really been explored and tested in practice. At the same time, the fact remains that the number of themes which really are common to all the world communions is relatively limited. It should therefore also be possible – by general agreement, to be sure – to form a variety of “coalitions” among particular world communions. For the WCC, this means maintaining relations with all the world communions together and with each one individually.

It would be important, however, for these coalitions to be part of an agreed overall plan. If the WCC is always associated only with the international organizations based in Geneva, namely LWF, WARC and the Conference of European Churches, this will inevitably be one-sided in the long run.

4. At the same time, major theological and ecclesiological problems and questions also remain to be clarified. The dialogues of recent decades have cast new light on some of the old theological issues, but new issues have emerged as relations have

developed. A particularly thorny issue is how binding decisions are taken in the different traditions. Obviously, each world communion will approach this question in the light of its own tradition. But it is equally true that all of them face new developments which have to be taken into account.⁴⁴ Sooner or later the question arises as to how, despite all divergences, common decisions can be taken by all world communions.

True, the forum on bilateral conversations exists for discussions of this kind. But there is no provision for these debates to find their way into the life and reflection of the various communions. The forum sessions have repeatedly issued recommendations to the conference of general secretaries;⁴⁵ but their impact has been close to zero. If the reflection at the level of the forum is to lead to tangible results, there must be an explicit mandate on the part of the world communions. If their conference is to bear fruit, the general secretaries need to be prepared to implement the recommendations they receive through both awareness-building and common action.

5. Lastly, all the world communions face the task of witnessing to the heritage they have received, and at the same time “discerning the signs of the times”: How is the gospel message to be transmitted in the present-day situation? For the response to the spiritual and social changes taking place with the passage of time cannot simply be “retrieved” at the press of a button in any of the confessional traditions.

Conscious common planning can result in placing the same great challenges of our time on the agenda of the WCC, and all the world communions, simultaneously. They would then deal with these issues, each in its own way but still simultaneously. Findings from these different venues could be compared and made accessible to all. How do churches assess the great technological achievement of our time? What is their “word” on the political and economic developments of today? How do they interpret the increase of violence against human beings and against nature? Common perspectives could arise from such a sustained dialogue.

At its general council meeting in Debrecen (1997), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches urged the churches to consider how social injustice and destruction of the environment in today’s world affect their profession of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The WCC added its voice to this appeal at its assembly in Harare (1998). Does this decision not constitute, fundamentally, a challenge to all the world communions? The terms in which the appeal is couched do not matter here. (For example, the notion concept of a *processus confessionis* may not make so much sense in other world confessions as it does in the Reformed tradition.) The important thing is whether Christianity can manage to speak out with a truly *common* voice against the foolishness of the present course of social and economic development.

For good reasons the world confessional families have renamed themselves Christian world communions, but that is not to say that the earlier designations have lost all meaning. *Confessio* and *communio* belong together. All the world communions are today bound by the duty of *confessio*, and they must find structures to enable them to fulfill – together – that common calling.

NOTES

¹ Diane Kessler, ed., *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the WCC*, Geneva, WCC, 1999, p.165.

² *Study Encounter*, IV, 1, 1968, p.46.

- ³ Clarence Proyty Shedd et al., *History of the World's Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations*, London, 1955.
- ⁴ Ruth Rouse, "Other Aspects of the Ecumenical Movement 1910-1948", in R. Rouse and S. Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, Philadelphia, 1954, p.599.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.611.
- ⁶ Hans Hauzenberger, *Einheit auf evangelischer Grundlage, Vom Werden und Wesen der Evangelischen Allianz*, 1986.
- ⁷ Marcel Pradervand, *A Century of Service: A History of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 1875-1975*, Edinburgh, 1975.
- ⁸ Jens Holger Schjorring, Prasanna Kumari, Norman A. Hjelm, eds, *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation*, Minneapolis, 1997, pp.3ff.
- ⁹ W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches*, Geneva, WCC, 1982, p.50.
- ¹⁰ The rule intended to do justice to the Lutheran objection states: "Seats in the assembly shall be allocated to the member churches by the central committee, due regard being given to such factors as numerical size, adequate confessional representation and adequate geographical distribution."
- ¹¹ The theme of the Amsterdam assembly was "Man's Disorder and God's Design", cf. W.A. Visser 't Hooft, ed., *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam*, London, 1949, pp.47ff.
- ¹² But even the World Alliance of Reformed Churches decided in 1956 to expand its secretariat by appointing a theological secretary; cf. Pradervand, *A Century of Service*, p.208.
- ¹³ Quoted in Rouse, *op. cit.*, p.616.
- ¹⁴ Marcel Pradervand, ed., *Proceedings of the 17th General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches, Princeton 1954*, Geneva, 1954, p.77.
- ¹⁵ The Methodist conference, for example, stated at its assembly in Springfield, Mass., in 1947: "The mission of Methodism... can best be carried on with the closest integration of the Methodist church throughout the world, in prayer, thought, purpose and service." Then, after the Amsterdam assembly, the relation was described as follows in 1951: "We welcome with deep gratitude the inauguration of the World Council of Churches and the steps which are being taken towards reunion in different parts of the world. It is because our loyalty is pledged to the WCC that we would reconsider our own tradition and its place in the universal church." Quoted in Rouse, *op. cit.*, p.614.
- ¹⁶ The phrase comes from Bishop Ivan Lee Holt, president of the Methodist World Conference, in *ibid.*, p.614.
- ¹⁷ *Christianity and Crisis*, vol. 8, no. 7, 26 April 1948.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in Edmond Perret, "The Conference of Secretaries of World Confessional Families 1957-1977", in Yoshio Ishida, Harding Meyer, Edmond Perret, *The History and Theological Concerns of World Confessional Families*, Lutheran Report, Geneva, Aug. 1979, pp.43-72.
- ¹⁹ W.A. Visser 't Hooft, ed., *The Evanston Report: The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1954*, New York, 1955, pp.184-85.
- ²⁰ Perret, *op. cit.*, p.46.
- ²¹ John A. Mackay, "Reflections on the World Confessional Issue", in *Reformed and Presbyterian World*, 1962, p.20.
- ²² Reported by Mackay in his article, *op. cit.*, p.20.
- ²³ Quoted from Peter L. Kjeseth, "Die Rolle der konfessionellen Weltbünde innerhalb der ökumenischen Bewegung für das nächste Jahrzehnt 1964" (manuscript, WCC archives).
- ²⁴ W.A. Visser 't Hooft, *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1961*, section on unity, London, 1962, p.133.
- ²⁵ *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, Oct. 1964, p.553.
- ²⁶ The statement from the October 1967 conference is particularly meagre (cf. *Study Encounter*, IV, 1, 1968)! Even the history of the ecumenical movement 1948-68 makes no mention of the change. Cf. Harold E. Fey, ed., *The History of the Ecumenical Movement: Vol. 2: 1948-1968: The Ecumenical Advance*, London, 1970.
- ²⁷ Lukas Vischer, "The Place and Task of 'Confessional Families'", in *The Duke Divinity School Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, winter 1968, p.29.
- ²⁸ Cf. the report "The Importance of the Conciliar Process in the Ancient Church for the Ecumenical Movement", in *New Directions in Faith and Order, Bristol 1967: Reports, Minutes Documents*, Faith and Order paper 50, pp.47-59. Further documentation in *Councils and the Ecumenical Movement*, World Council Studies 5, Geneva, 1967.
- ²⁹ The Uppsala assembly dealt with the theme of catholicity and sought to develop the concept from various angles. It pronounced in particular on the question of unity at the universal level. The key recommendation says: "The ecumenical movement helps to enlarge this experience of universality, and its regional

councils and its World Council may be regarded as a transitional opportunity for eventually actualizing a truly universal, ecumenical, conciliar form of common life and witness. The members of the WCC, committed to each other, should work for the time when a genuinely universal council may once more speak for all Christians and lead the way into the future." Cf. Norman Goodall, ed., *The Uppsala Report 1968*, London, 1968, p.7, in particular p.17.

³⁰ David M. Paton, ed., *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975*, Geneva, WCC, 1976, p.60.

³¹ Vischer, *op. cit.*, p.34.

³² "The Ecumenical Role of the World Confessional Families in the Ecumenical Movement", *WCC Exchange*, no. 3/2, July 1977, p.5.

³³ *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1974.

³⁴ Minutes of the conference of secretaries of the WCFs, Geneva, 19-21 Nov. 1973, appendix, quoted in Perret, *op. cit.*, p.67.

³⁵ *Breaking Barriers*, p.196.

³⁶ *WCC Exchange*, no. 1, March 1979.

³⁷ *WCC Central Committee Minutes*, Kingston, Jamaica, 1-11 Jan. 1979, pp.30-32.

³⁸ See *Breaking Barriers*, p.198.

³⁹ The reports of the forum sessions have been published, cf. *The Three Reports of the Forum on Bilateral Conversations*, Faith and Order paper 107, Geneva, 1981; *The Fourth Forum on Bilateral Conversations 1985*, Faith and Order paper 125; *the Fifth Forum on International Bilateral Dialogues 1990*, Faith and Order paper 156; *The Sixth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues 1994*, Faith and Order paper 168; *The Seventh Forum on Bilateral Dialogues 1997*, Faith and Order paper 179; *The Eighth Forum on Bilateral Dialogues 2001*, Faith and Order paper 190.

⁴⁰ *WCC Central Committee Minutes*, Moscow, 16-27 July 1989, pp.65-70, in particular p.66.

⁴¹ In a memorandum to the central committee in 1990 the then general secretary, Emilio Castro, wrote: "Some confessional families have gone through a process of theological, ecclesiological self-examination and are affirming their very being with the word 'communion' (Anglican, Lutheran etc). What does the reaffirmation of the Christian world communions mean for our common understanding of the World Council of Churches? Do we want to add to the 'confessional' communion a parallel 'ecumenical' communion? What do we add, what do we challenge? What does the WCC, this fellowship of basically national churches, bring to the churches as they enter into confessional and geographical relations?" Central committee document no. 4, p.5; for the response of the central committee cf. *WCC Central Committee Minutes*, Geneva, 25-30 March 1990, pp.89-91. Castro's paper was referred to a committee; the central committee resolution remained vague.

⁴² *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches*, a policy statement adopted by the WCC central committee of the WCC and commended to the member churches and ecumenical partners for study and action, Geneva, Sept. 1977, p.22.

⁴³ E.g. the Nairobi assembly, cf. *Breaking Barriers*, p.197.

⁴⁴ Michael Root, "Christian World Communions and the CUV Process", *The Ecumenical Review*, 1998, p.330, underestimates the theological importance of the convictions underlying the diverse forms of organization of the world communions, when (as a good Lutheran) he states: "With some important exceptions (again, most notably the Roman Catholic Church) churches are now so organized that the most important decision-making body usually exists at the national level: for example, the autocephalous Orthodox churches, the Anglican provinces, the typical Protestant denomination. This organizational form is a modern development, closely bound up with the evolution of the nation-state, and has no a priori theological necessity." As though the centralism of the Roman Catholic Church were not also a modern development! He is right, however, when he continues: "Without calling this form of ecclesial organization into question, one can still note that in a world made smaller by the modern technologies of travel and communication some ways need to be found to express and live out the international unity of the church. But what is this international unity of national churches, and what is its appropriate institutional form? In their own ways, the WCC and the CWCs are almost all addressing this question."

⁴⁵ The fourth forum (1985) stated: "Christian world communions should constantly watch for opportunities of turning agreement on doctrine into common worship, witness and service". The eighth forum (2001) called on the general secretaries to make sure that Christian world communions participate together in the process of reception and contribute to the clarification of notions such as *communio*, visible unity, and so on.