

## **Interview in written form with Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches**

**Background:** The WCC was founded as a fellowship of churches which have committed themselves to make visible their unity in Christ and to call one another to a deeper expression of that unity through worship and common life, witness and service to the world. The doctrinal basis of this unity had to be as comprehensive as possible.

After several decades of real rapprochement, respectively with reference to the de-demonization of the other (Vatican II, Faith and Order, Lima Document etc.) and the objectification of substantial differences, from the entry of the Orthodox into the WCC, the rapprochement slowed down. The rise of Pentecostalism within and outside of the established denominations, the strengthening of fundamentalist and independent currents and churches have made an already enormous theological task even more complex and expanded the number of stakeholders; all of this in the light of de-colonization, the Cold War and facilitated possibilities of common witness.

While for many churches, the success of ecumenism reckons initially in the light of Eucharistic hospitality and con-celebration, the progress between Eastern and Western churches is centered on the question of the primacy of Rome, respectively of Constantinople over Moscow.

Faced with the impossibility of resolving these issues in a frontal and direct way, many bilateral initiatives emerged so as to strengthen and broaden the consensus and agreements: Anglican-Catholic, Orthodox-Catholic, Lutheran-Catholic (1999), Methodist-Anglican, Inter-protestant (Community of Protestant Churches in Europe), WCC-Vatican and now Community of Protestant Churches in Europe-Vatican.

Living together on the path of unity has become more important than agreements on the definition of visible unity. The initiative of the Global Christian Forum grafts on this development. Today, there are a number of bilateral agreements and dialogues, none of which can claim exclusivity.

Internally the WCC has faced several major challenges: financial deficits, pension funds, declining incomes and contributions, reorganization of the Secretariat, governance reform, restructuring of Bossey, real estate project, reduction of workforce. The **Conference of European Churches** and the **World Communion of Reformed Churches** have left the Ecumenical Centre, while the Lutheran World Federation had seriously considered it. Some consolidation has been achieved, but a sustainable future of the WCC is not yet guaranteed.

1. You have been leading the WCC for 10 years now. Is the WCC today a healthier or weaker organisation than 10 years ago? How do you measure this evolution?

A: The WCC is a well functioning and well organized organization, dealing with our challenges and exploring our potential with ambitions. The interest in the co-operation with the WCC from other partners, and the attention and involvement in the work of the WCC from our member churches, have increased in this period. This is happening as we have developed the interaction with others in our program work, using our resources to the maximum, as well as with due diligence in our planning and with professional budget control. The level of programme budgets and activities has been adjusted according to the level of income, and clearer priorities have been set. The WCC has in spite of decline in income due to the challenges related to radical shifts in currency rates in Switzerland in this last ten years had a stabilized and even to some degree a net increase in the income from member churches in their local currency. The income from our most significant funding partners has been quite stable, with clear and repeated commitments to support the role and the programmes of the WCC. Some agreements with new funding partners have also been established. The challenge related to the deficit in the pension fund that I discovered after coming into office, has been dealt with

in a commitment to steward the asset of our real estate in Geneva to the maximum, implemented in close cooperation with our bank, the property developer Implenia and local partners in Geneva. In spite of long and very demanding processes, the Green Village project has been developed to the starting point of ground-breaking in the next months. We have particularly developed the form and profile of our communication work, into a much more interactive approach with churches and partners, but also proactively sharing from all our programme activities, visits, events etc. The climax was under the visit of Pope Francis at our 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year. Interestingly, the attention to the WCC website and in social media has even increased since then.

2. How does the WCC balance Faith and Order with Life and Work? Several voices have repeatedly complained that the WCC acts and communicates too much like a non-governmental organization or a relief agency. Is there an equilibrium?

A: More important than an “equilibrium” between the two is dynamic relationship between these dimensions of our work as WCC. I have in my period as general secretary argued and worked for an integrated approach in all our programme work, showing that the work for unity has many dimensions, and that the work for justice and peace has a clear theological and spiritual basis and motivation. The understanding of ecumenical ecclesiology developed in the WCC in concepts like “mutual accountability” (Cf my book *The Truth We Owe Each Other*, WCC Publications 2016) reflects that there is a moral dimension in the call to unity and a theological dimension in our work for a better world. In the accountability to one another as churches, based on our shared common faith, there is a duty to stay together for the sake of our common witness, also our advocacy for justice and peace.

The work following the two original streams of the organized ecumenical movement of Faith and Order and Life and Work continues in many ways, even if for understandable reasons there is more public attention to the work related to the agenda for justice and peace of the day. The Faith and Order team has been kept at the same level for many years, even increased. The significant document “The Church – Towards a Common Vision” is a fruit of long term activity over years and decades. This last week we also received the response from the Roman Catholic Church, that clearly shows the significance of the work of Faith and Order also today. The work for unity is also a long term objective in our work for ecumenical formation, particularly related to the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, but also in our work for Mission and Evangelism and in our institutional relations to all Christian world communions bilaterally and multilaterally. The relationship to the Roman Catholic Church, as well as relations to other world communions, has been pursued along both axes: The work for visible unity based on theological reflection and on new initiatives in our common service and witness in the world.

3. Originally, the WCC claimed to be the partner for the Roman Catholic Church in terms of working for theological unity. Today the Vatican has numerous dialogue partners (i. e. Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglicans) who in turn are members of the WCC. Thus, could you define the exact role of the WCC in ecumenical dialogue today?

A: The WCC promotes, pursues, encourages, monitors, communicates and publishes ecumenical theological dialogues. This is so primarily about the multilateral dialogues organized by WCC through Faith and Order, but also in relation to the network of bilateral inter-confessional dialogues. The Joint Working Group between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church was established 52 years ago. In the same period, in the years after Vatican II, the Pontifical Council to Promote Christian Unity was established, opening many dialogues with confessional partners and with the WCC. The Roman Catholic Church became full members of the Faith and Order Commission in 1968. As mentioned above, the Roman Catholic Church has contributed substantially to the multilateral dialogue pursued by Faith and Order. However, as one can see in the texts as well as in the responses to “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,” The Apostolic Faith study, and now “The Church – Towards a Common Vision”, the work in the multilateral dialogue pursued by Faith and Order in many ways reflects and synchronizes the results of the bilateral dialogues. The Conference of the General Secretaries of the Christian World Communions has acknowledged and affirmed the role of the WCC through the work of Faith and Order to pursue the Forum for Bilateral Dialogues. The WCC is the publisher of the collections of all reports from bilateral dialogues (*Growth in Communion*).

4. The WCC also has got a new partner in ecumenical dialogue: the Global Christian Forum. Does this development make the dialogue in view of the goal of the ecumenical movement even more difficult? Could you describe the actual contribution of Baptists, Pentecostals and Evangelicals in striving for unity?

A: The Global Christian Forum was established on the initiative of the WCC, after the WCC Assembly in 1998. It is a forum, a platform to meet in a wider context with our member churches and official ecumenical partners particularly also with those who did not have an official relation to WCC or other ecumenical organizations, typically Pentecostal and Evangelical (in the Anglo-Saxon meaning of “evangelical”) churches. It is not a partner to the WCC; the WCC is defined as one of the 4 pillars for this platform together with the Roman Catholic Church, the World Pentecostal Fellowship and the World Evangelical Alliance. The effect of the work of the Global Christian Forum has been more trust, better relations, more common commitments to dialogue and common work. One example: For the first time the World Pentecostal Fellowship had an ecumenical workshop over two days during its Assembly (Calgary, September 2019), where the WCC general secretary participated in the panels. The Global Christian Forum was then recognized as an important contribution to this development. The WCC does not see the Global Christian Forum as a problem but a potential to foster more and deeper dialogues between ecumenical partners. The WCC works on this platform on the condition that it is a forum, not an organization competing with or replacing the WCC.

5. What are the two biggest challenges for the WCC in the next ten years in terms of organisation as well as Church platforms?

A: 1. The WCC must prove itself as relevant, supporting and challenging the churches to be faithful to their calling and in their efforts for Christian unity, but also in their joint struggle for a just peace in the world. The WCC must prove that

it promotes Christ's love and carries the values of the Gospel together into a world that is polarized by political, national, and economic interests, where the human rights are ignored and hate is promoted in different media and in violence.

2. The WCC must continue to be reliable, transparent, accountable and efficient in its work and use of resources, uniting and including the churches based on our common basis, purpose and vision.

6. The WCC closely collaborates with the UN and the Human Rights Council, as well as with UNHCR and UNICEF. Why?

A: The WCC has the objective to work for just peace in all its dimensions, among the churches and religions, between the nations and the people, in the market places and with creation. This requires proactive participation and interaction on behalf of the churches on the international level and with international partners, like the UN institutions and their organizations. In the search to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals the churches in the world are at the frontiers in the local contexts and should be the promoters of these objectives based on our moral values and visions for the one human family, all created equally in the image of God. We see that the commitment to multilateral cooperation in the world is diminishing or even defined as improper (like by the President of the USA in UN General Assembly last month). This is a moral and spiritual challenge also for the WCC, as humanity is facing overwhelming challenges like the human-caused climate emergency, challenges that can only be addressed and solved by proper acknowledgement of the truth and proper joint efforts.

7. The WCC regularly receives strident media commentaries regarding its commitment in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Today the political dialogue process seems completely desperate. Would it make any difference if the WCC withdraws from the spot?

A: The WCC has committed itself to work for a just peace for both Palestinians and Israelis. This conflict has a special place in the history and the work of the WCC, due to the history of these peoples related to the Biblical origin of the churches, the Church history related to the Jewish people, as well as the colonial history and even the history of crusades. It is also a duty to address the need to show solidarity with our member churches in the region, as they also represent the suffering and occupied Palestinian people, and some use Christian theological arguments to legitimize this occupation and the injustices against the Palestinians. Therefore, the WCC involvement in this region, is not only based on a reflection on the effect, but also the moral obligations we have as churches. We work with our Palestinian partners and many of the WCC churches and partners for a just peace for all, as well as in dialogues with international Jewish organizations. The most comprehensive program in this respect for the WCC is the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel program, that has been evaluated by others as the most significant of this kind in providing a protective presence for the Palestinian population. It also gives the participants a firsthand insight into the effect of the occupation.

8. What has been your most beautiful and moving experience personally as general secretary?

A: There are many, almost daily experiences of how meaningful this ministry and work of the WCC is. They come as ecumenical encounters, as building relations and bridges through meetings, visits, conversations, communication internally and worldwide. We sense that it makes a difference to meet, but also that the WCC can pay attention to and raise our voice on behalf of suffering Christians and others who need our support. That we have been able to establish trust and confidence in the work of the WCC has given us new opportunities and possibilities to contribute with our values, visions and various initiatives for justice, peace, unity and care for God's creation. To work on programs like those addressing HIV, mobilizing against gender-based violence and violence against children, opening new channels for dialogues with other religions in search for justice and peace, to see that the work for unity gains new dimensions and commitments for example in our relations to the Roman Catholic Church - and much more has given me a lot of inspiration and joy.

9. Norway and Switzerland are in many ways comparable countries. Will you take anything home with you from Switzerland? Will you miss anything from here?

A: I have enjoyed the easy access to the mountains, with the beauty and joy related to that, summer and winter. I have enjoyed seeing the potential of small nations in peacemaking and peacebuilding, as both countries do in many ways. I have been privileged to live in Geneva and at Bossey, and have that as my home for 10 years.

10. What would you like to suggest to our Swiss Churches for their future work?

A: Continue to be the light and the salt in this society, that needs the perspective of the Gospel as an affirmation of Christ's love for all, whatever position, status, wealth or condition one might be in, also affirming the contribution and the presence of people from all parts of the world in this country. The Swiss churches could strengthen their relations to all the churches being present and established in this country, for the benefit of all. The Swiss churches have shown strong support and hospitality to the work of the WCC and the international ecumenical work. This is very much needed also in the future.