



The Core Vocation of the Global Christian Forum

Some Reflections

by Huibert Van Beek

September 2020

The discussion during the virtual conference of the GCF Committee of September 3rd has clearly demonstrated the desire of the committee to hold together unity and mission as the core vocation of the Global Christian Forum. With that, the committee has been faithful to the purpose statement that has guided the Forum from its inception.

The discussion has also made it clear that two basic questions need to be further addressed:

1. In terms of unity, what is the specific role of the Forum, and what is the specific contribution it can make to the search for Christian unity in the wider ecumenical movement?
2. In the area of mission, or common witness, what can the Forum offer to the witness of the churches in the world without doing what is already being done by the many existing inter-church organizations (ecumenical, evangelical, confessional) to which the churches participating in the Forum belong?

Unity

There is an ongoing reflection within and beyond the ecumenical movement on the nature of unity. While the biblical imperative (John 17:21) is admitted by all, opinions differ on the legitimacy of divisions and how unity should be made manifest. Expressions such as visible unity, organic unity, Christian unity, unity in diversity, spiritual unity, point at a broad range of interpretations and options, all of which have their implications for the

efforts made — or not made — to foster the unity of the churches. In the churches committed to the ecumenical movement, one can also observe a certain lassitude with regard to the slow pace of progress in the field of theology and doctrine; or, when progress is made (e.g. on Baptism, Eucharist, and Mission) the tangible and lasting impact on the life of the churches can feel modest. Among church leaders and theologians who do continue to give direction to the search for unity, this has led to the development of new models, such as receptive ecumenism, or spiritual ecumenism, which are less directly focused on overcoming doctrinal controversies.

Another trend, which was also highlighted in the committee discussion of September 3rd, is to consider that we have entered a new stage of ecumenism, in which the theological differences are no longer the primary concern. In this view, the emphasis should be on shared witness to the world. This could indeed give a new impetus to the ecumenical movement and be a source of renewal, if shared witness is truly conceived of by the churches as a demanding and costly challenge.

In practice, however, ecumenism is today understood in many local situations as a friendly, at best fraternal, co-existence of churches from different traditions that are readily cooperating but remain nevertheless divided.

The various views on and attitudes towards unity are all present in the Global Christian Forum, in the committee as well as among the participants in the meetings of the Forum. That is in itself enough reason to keep the theological discussion on unity going, to deepen it and to foster mutual understanding.

But the Forum has the ability to be more than a platform to reflect on unity. It has the unique feature of bringing to the table practically all the traditions of world Christianity today — both the churches participating in the ecumenical movement and those belonging to the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. There is no other global inter-church configuration that is able to do this in quite the way the Forum can, and for the same purpose: fostering unity and common witness. It is this distinctiveness of the Forum that determines the role it is uniquely called to play, and the contribution it is uniquely called to make in the pursuit of Christian unity. It is to bring together the churches belonging to the two streams, ecumenical and Evangelical/Pentecostal, that have been divided for over a

century, and to nurture their rapprochement in the different contexts and at the various levels where they function.

The Global Christian Forum came into being at a *kairos* moment of awareness on both sides that the time had come to overcome the divisions of the past. It would be a mistake to assume that this was an initial task, a first step so to say, which now, after twenty years, basically has been achieved. That may be true for the Forum's committee, and indeed, various statements in the September 3 discussion gratefully testified to the amount of trust that is there. But it is not the case in many situations, whether at the level of the major regions¹ or in numerous national and local settings. As was also highlighted in the discussion, there is still much fear and ignorance, and one might add to that mutual mistrust and rejection. Alienation, exclusion, and hostility have deeply affected the relationships between the established churches and the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements.

It would equally be a mistake to underestimate the depth and pain of the divide, both in terms of history and current realities. Fortunately, it is also true that today more goodwill and openness towards one another can be found among church leaders and faithful people on both sides, than was the case only a few decades ago.

Concretely, it is therefore the vocation of the Forum to identify the regional and national contexts where a beginning should be made, where more should be done to draw together the existing ecumenical and Evangelical/Pentecostal entities, e.g. churches, councils, conferences, alliances, fellowships, etc. Regional consultations are the most effective means of the Forum to make this happen. The Global Christian Forum does not have the capacity to operate adequately at the national level, and even less locally. By bringing together representatives of the regional bodies and of the churches from a number of countries in a given region, by offering them the Forum experience through the tools of equal representation (50/50) and the telling of faith stories, the vision of the Forum can

¹ Where "region" or "regionally" is mentioned in this paper it refers basically to Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, Middle East, North America, and Pacific.

permeate the national context. As already noted, examples of that exist in several countries.²

Regional consultations must of course be prepared and organized in careful cooperation with the existing regional ecumenical councils or conferences, evangelical alliances, episcopal conferences, etc. As it is now ten years since the last round of such meetings took place, it will be crucially important to pinpoint the new generation of church leadership that has come into office and is not familiar with the Global Christian Forum.

There is yet another aspect to the role and the contribution of the Forum with regard to unity. It is summarized in the question that has always accompanied the GCF in its successive stages: who is missing around the table? While indeed "a broad range of Christian churches and interchurch organizations" (purpose statement) is participating, there are still groups who are not, or not sufficiently, represented. On the ecumenical side that is the case in particular of the Orthodox family, as was highlighted also in the September 3 discussion. This calls for a focused effort of the Forum to foster the interest of the Orthodox churches and their participation in it. For instance, priority could be given to holding consultations in (sub)regions such as Eastern Europe and the Middle East where Orthodoxy is rooted historically and constitutes the majority. And in regions where the Orthodox churches are a minority, e.g. Latin America, their participation should receive special attention, also because Orthodoxy as a family of churches does not have its own representative regional structures.

On the other hand, some of the large classical Pentecostal and Evangelical denominations in various regions are not fully taking part in the Forum, or are not participating at all. Similar endeavors are needed to enhance their participation. In the constantly evolving Evangelical and Pentecostal world, more recent groups such as neo-pentecostal, large neo-charismatic churches (e.g. in West Africa), newly emerging churches, megachurches also, have remained largely outside the scope of the GCF. Here too an intentional approach is necessary to bring to the table these new expressions of Christian presence. A particularly difficult and problematic issue is that of radicalized evangelicals (USA, Brazil) who are

² E.g. India, Indonesia, etc. There are, fortunately, also situations where a rapprochement has taken place without having been inspired directly by the Forum. The Forum should take this in account gratefully and seek interaction for the benefit of the cause.

promoting moral and political positions in ways that make any dialogue virtually impossible. Whether this should be dealt with or not, it is part of the vocation of GCF to expand the circle of Evangelical and Pentecostal groups participating in the efforts of the Forum towards Christian unity, and it is particularly well placed to do so.

The contribution of the GCF to unity is by no means a minor one, compared to what is done for instance by the WCC's Commission on Faith and Order or in the bilateral theological dialogues between those participating in Christian World Communions. On the contrary, one has only to look at the statistics of world Christianity to see the importance. Today, Evangelicals and Pentecostals count for one quarter, against less than two percent a century or so ago; numbers represented in the WCC constitute another quarter and Catholics the other half. Crossing the rifts and healing the divisions that separate these parts of the one body is a major task. The objective is not to get one joining the other, but to open up to one another and together to move to what will be new.

Mission

In the opening sentence of the purpose statement of GCF, holding together unity and mission, is expressed in the phrases "fostering mutual respect" and "exploring and addressing together common challenges." At the initial stage of the Forum, and in the years following, there was considerable reluctance to take up the "mission" part of the statement. The concept of "common challenges" was mainly understood in terms of potentially controversial issues. It was felt that the relationships were as yet too fragile to take the risk of entering into discussions in which disagreements could lead to a breakdown of the process, especially from the Evangelical and Pentecostal side. It could also provide an argument against getting involved at all for those who were invited to join but choose to stand aloof. The emphasis was therefore on building relationships and nurturing mutual trust. Issues did come up in the consultations and meetings and were to some extent discussed, including matters like evangelism and proselytism, moral values, relations with other religions, etc., but care was taken not to go further. Disagreements were simply noted. In some meetings suggestions were made for the Forum to deal with questions confronting the churches in their witness; this was however considered not to be its role, because GCF was not meant to become operational.

At the second global gathering (in Manado in 2011) participants affirmed that mutual trust was now sufficient for the Forum to move on to a next stage. They prayerfully declared: “We have heard the Spirit calling us, not only to foster respect for one another, but now also to move forward together in addressing common challenges.”³ Manado said clearly that “GCF should continue building relationships by organizing gatherings periodically,” and that “the unity experienced in the sharing of faith stories provides the evidence that we are fellow agents of God's mission, called and sent by the same Lord Jesus Christ and empowered by the same Holy Spirit.”⁴

Thus the Manado gathering provided the impetus to address unity *and* mission, or to put it in the wording of the second part of the purpose statement: “fostering relationships that may lead to common witness.”

As the Forum is contributing to bringing ecumenical and Evangelical as well as Pentecostal bodies closer to one another in the major regions of the world and in national situations, these churches, councils, conferences, and alliances may — hopefully — come to a point where they consider that common action and cooperation are wished for and become possible. These partners will then decide which form(s) their actions should take, which common challenges should be addressed and how, according to their priorities and in the context of the region or the nation they share. Whether it is on evangelization, social action, or major contemporary issues like racism, human rights, peace, environment, their joining together will enhance and strengthen their Christian witness. Theological competence, expertise, and experience in all these areas exist on both sides, but gifts differ. It will be to the benefit of all to put them together.

In this same spirit, Manado also encouraged holding “Forum consultations for specialized ministries, e.g. justice, reconciliation, healing, etc.,”⁵ a proposal that as yet has not been taken up. Bringing together persons from ecumenical and evangelical backgrounds in a region (or country) which share competence and calling in a specific area, using the tools

³ See Guidelines from the Second Global Gathering of the Global Christian Forum, 4-7 October 2011, Manado, Indonesia; top of page 2.

⁴ id.

⁵ See Manado Guidelines, Next steps for GCF, page 1.

of the Forum to build mutual trust and guide their discussion on the issue, can be a further means for GCF to carry out its mission.

Here lies the unique contribution the Forum is able to offer to the witness of the churches in the world without doing what is already being done by the existing global inter-church organizations: the shared witness of ecumenical and Evangelical or Pentecostal communities of faith in Christ, which for too long have been witnessing in separation from one another, as fellow agents in God's mission, regionally, nationally, and locally.

It is not the role of the committee to engage in actions such as taking positions in situations that call for the voice of the church to be heard, making public statements, or launching issue-oriented programs. Doing this would inevitably lead to misunderstandings and tensions, as the past has taught. GCF is not an organization that can speak or act on behalf of a membership constituency. The churches and inter-church organizations which come together inspired by the Forum can do so, in their common name and through their own means of collaboration.

The challenges put to the committee by its younger members should become effective in the regional and national contexts. GCF should further enhance the participation of young people by enabling and empowering them to be fully involved there as well, along with church leaders and others.

If the committee is able to enact the vision argued here, it will be in itself a powerful manifestation of common witness.