

Our Unfolding Journey with Jesus Christ:

Reflections on the Global Christian Forum Experience

Since its beginnings, more than a decade and a half ago, the Global Christian Forum has accumulated considerable practical wisdom. This document is a first attempt to articulate theological (and especially ecclesiological) insights which have emerged from the experiences of the Forum's distinctive life.

This reflection is written in the recognition of the many different understandings, and uses of language, among Forum participants. It acknowledges the affirmation (made at the second Global Gathering in Manado in 2011) that there is no expectation of 'abandoning theological distinctives'. Further, it highlights that the primary purpose and practices of the Forum are focused on extending and deepening relationships rather than upon theological dialogues seeking to produce agreed texts. Mirroring the Forum's own practices, this account is therefore doxological and testimonial, narrative and descriptive, rather than theoretical or analytical.

Nonetheless, it is hoped that this reflection, produced through a process of broad collaboration, will help to address questions of how to deepen theological clarity in reflecting on the purpose and promise of the Forum, and will contribute to the ongoing conversations through which these questions emerged. Still, the best means of appreciating the fullness of the GCF remains to 'come and see' (John 1:39).



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1. The Journey of the Global Christian Forum

1.1. A Fresh Effort in Changing Circumstances

We give praise and thanks to God the Father, who is always at work calling his people to share in the life and mission of his Son, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, we confess that the many separations and divisions among Christians have often impeded the effective proclamation of the Gospel to the nations (See John 17:21).

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) emerged as a new and fresh initiative in the late twentieth century, responding to both the achievements and the limitations in the historical quest for Christian unity. The twentieth century saw a number of significant changes in global Christianity, among them the emergence of new expressions of the Christian faith in the Global South, the growth of Christianity in China, an increasing awareness of religious pluralism in every region of the world, the public re-emergence of Christianity in former Communist countries, the continuing suffering of the church in many diverse settings, and rising secularisation in western cultures. These developments helped contribute to the need for an initiative that would enable the broadening and deepening of relationships among brothers and sisters in Christ as well as among churches who would have little if any encounter, or likelihood of encounter, with one another. The GCF is such an initiative: it has provided a flexible process in which all Christians and churches are invited to recognise in those from very different confessions, traditions, cultures, or backgrounds the marks of living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

1.2 Taking the First Steps

The call for a new global initiative for Christian unity resounded in December 1998 at the 8th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Harare, Zimbabwe. Acknowledging that the global Christian family extended far beyond the membership of the WCC, the Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser, then the general secretary, envisioned some table, some neutral space, some 'forum' which could facilitate a broader and deeper pattern of relationships among all those who confess Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. The Assembly encouraged pursuit of this vision through a process of broad consultation. Two years later, a meeting of a wide spectrum of leaders of churches – Anglican, Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox, Pentecostal, classical Protestant – expressed the strong conviction that the time was ripe for pursuing such a conversation among themselves.

Another defining moment occurred in June, 2002, at Fuller Theological Seminary, a prominent Evangelical seminary in Pasadena (USA). Representatives of a wide range of global Christianity gathered: African Instituted, Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Disciples, Evangelical, Friends (Quakers), Holiness, Independent, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Moravian, Old Catholic, Orthodox (Eastern and Oriental), Pentecostal, Reformed, Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventist, United and Uniting Churches, together with representatives from the World Council of Churches and Evangelical and Pentecostal alliances, national and regional ecumenical bodies, and parachurch organisations (including World Vision, the YWCA, the YMCA and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students). The love for one another that flowed from their recognition of Jesus Christ in each other led to full agreement in the midst of their dramatic diversity on a declaration of common purpose and faith. The new forum, they said, would be

an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organisations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.

This declaration remains to this day the foundational statement of purpose and faith of the GCF. (See *Sidebar 1*)

A number of continental consultations, through which the vision and its practice were tested and consolidated, prepared the way for the first GCF global assembly at Limuru, Kenya, in November 2007. This gathered an unprecedented diversity of the world's Christian families, over 230 participants, at a high level of leadership, from all the main Christian traditions in the world and their global bodies. (See *Sidebar 2*) Notable was the desire and commitment to be part of this vital movement expressed by a wide range of leaders – from the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Council of Churches, the Pentecostal movement, African Instituted churches, global Christian world communions, Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

From its earliest days, the GCF has expressed its hope for Christian unity by inviting an unparalleled range of leaders of Christian churches, communities and inter-church organisations to come together. The Forum invites these representatives to gather in the spirit of Jesus' prayer to the Father for his disciples – 'that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:21) – and conscious of the wider impact of relationships among Christians and Christian bodies described in John 13:35: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'. Participants come together because of faith in a reconciling God: 'All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation ...' (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). The Forum process is conducted with the expectation that, when those who participate come to recognise Christ in one another, and one another in Christ, then there will also be recognition of the sharing of an unbreakable bond which is not of our making, but God's (Philemon 1:6).

(*Sidebar 1*)

The Guiding Purpose Statement agreed upon at the Pasadena meeting of 2002 was affirmed in 2007 at the first Global Gathering at Limuru:

To create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.

In the spirit of John 17:21 " that all of them may be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me" and because of our faith in a reconciling God (2 Cor.5: 18-21) a forum can pursue the following:

- Deepen our commitment to God's Word and mission in the world;
- Enhance our understanding of contemporary expressions of Christian mission;
- Pursue principles and practices that enable us to deal freely, responsibly and peaceably with our Christian differences and distinctive qualities;
- Engage in theological reflection in areas of mutual concern;
- Strengthen the wholeness of the church by encouraging communication and cooperation; and
- Foster relationships that may lead to common witness.

(*Sidebar 2*)

Media reports on the gathering captured this enthusiasm: 'History made at Global Forum', 'A Watershed in 21st Century Christianity', 'A Milestone, Setting an Example and Suggesting Standards for Dialogue among Christians'.

The GCF's particular concern is for those who have had little, if any encounter with one another. When any of us are distanced from one another, all of us are diminished. 'The eye cannot say to the hand "I have no need of you" nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you"' (1 Corinthians 12:21). In response to the contemporary ecclesial situation of fragmentation and to God's call, the GCF is always asking 'who is missing from among us? Who still should be invited to gather?'

2. *The Life of the Global Christian Forum: Encountering One Another in Christ*

The GCF invites representatives of churches and inter-church organizations to come together, to meet one another, to discover their shared relationship to our Lord Jesus, and to discern together their common challenges. This call comes in response to the need for Christians to experience with one another the deep bonds of faith and fellowship (koinonia) already shared as disciples of Christ.

The efforts of the GCF to initiate relationships and to promote their broadening and deepening offer distinctive new ways of coming together, journeying together and witnessing together. These are interwoven, rather than sequential. The primary purpose of the Forum has always been to encourage new relationships among those who do not otherwise meet one another. But, of course, the network of relationships is wonderfully complex. Any meeting may offer a first encounter between representatives of certain traditions present, or with wider regional or global perspectives; it may also bring opportunities for a renewal of relationship or to take existing relationships into new areas. This reflects the diversity in ecclesial traditions, personal experiences, and particular cultural and socio-political contexts of those who meet. One example is that relationships between particular traditions in one setting may be experienced quite differently elsewhere.

2.1. *A Distinctive Space for Encounter*

Among the various dynamics of the GCF, there is distinctiveness in both the way in which the GCF offers invitations, and in the nature of the space in which participants gather and encounter one another.

From the beginning there has been a GCF commitment that in its meetings about half of the participants come from those Evangelical, Pentecostal, and other churches which have not engaged in the ecumenical movement. The other half represent churches historically engaged with the ecumenical movement

This space is primarily a 'forum'. It is an open space, welcoming representatives of all Christian communities which are able to 'confess the triune God, and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity.' (See the Guiding Purpose Statement in the sidebar above.) This affirmation indicates the scope of the space and its foundation-stone. At the same time, within the Forum it is recognised and accepted that the way in which participants affirm this truth may differ.

The Forum thus recognises that participants come from varied understandings and practices of Christian life. Further, it is acknowledged that the word 'church' (or 'churches') is used in many different ways.

Participants are therefore invited to engage one another in the challenges – and enriching opportunities – of expanding their ways of understanding, speaking about, and experiencing ecclesial life. They are invited to speak from the integrity of their own

perspectives, traditions and experiences. Everyone is to listen respectfully and openly to accounts of the living Word of God at work in the people of God, which may be expressed in ways different to those in which they are accustomed to speaking about their faith.

We gather in the name of Jesus Christ. This Christological affirmation underlies and shapes our encounters together. We come with the desire and hope that, by the Holy Spirit at work among us, we may grow in experiencing others as members of the body of Christ. The Forum has proved itself to be a fruitful space for recognising one another as 'belonging to the Way' (Acts 9:2). It is a challenge both to receive one another, and to be ready to receive from one another. In this experience there is a two-fold dynamic at work: we may come to recognise Christ in those whom we had not previously known as brothers and sisters in Christ. We also may be challenged to live in these relationships in new and deeper ways, with all the implications this may have for our own discipleship, both personal and in communities.

Within the Forum participants share in a time and place of openness to the transformative action of the Holy Spirit who calls Christians to ever greater faithfulness to Jesus Christ, individually and together. The life of faith requires constant readiness to turn (metanoia) to the action of the Holy Spirit at work in places and peoples beyond our own traditions and experiences, and to be called forward into newness of life by our Lord who repeatedly says 'follow me' (John 21:19).

Through maintaining openness to new participants, and to the work of the Holy Spirit among the followers of Jesus Christ, the Forum similarly remains open to new and on-going shaping. Those who participate in a GCF event share in ownership of this space, and join in the development of the Forum's life, for 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' (1 Corinthians 12:7).

To respond to an invitation to the Forum is to accept the element of risk that is entailed in preparedness to move beyond known ecclesial experiences. Participants can expect to find that their preconceived notions, both about themselves and their own experiences, as well as about how they view others, may be challenged by the Lord who 'has broken down the dividing wall ... the hostility between us'. In this way participants no longer find themselves 'strangers and aliens' to one another but recognise each other as 'citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.' Participation is also understood to entail openness to an enrichment of Christian relationship, for in Christ 'the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom [we] also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God' (Ephesians 2:14-22).

Importantly, the GCF is not a church, a council of churches, or an organisation with membership; and it is not intended to replace churches, ecclesial bodies or networks. Its aim is to complement the work of the churches in the promotion of Christian unity. The GCF responds to the isolation, estrangement and brokenness within the body of Christ in today's world.

The GCF is committed to working with local churches and ecclesial bodies (including at national, sub-regional, or regional levels) in the organisation of meetings and other events. The intention is, as appropriate, first, to establish new relationships, and also to encourage existing relationships and to support their broadening and deepening, with the hope that the experience of the Forum will then enrich their further development in response to the Spirit's leading. The GCF is blessed by the welcome and witness it receives, and has been profoundly enhanced in its continuing journey.

The Forum has intentionally sought to retain a movement-like character, as light and flexible as possible in its staffing and structures, and to work with minimal institutional burden. (See *Sidebar 3*) From the beginning, the GCF has understood its existence to be provisional. It prays and works for the day when its service will no longer be necessary.

(*Sidebar 3*)

Guidance for the Forum's directions is given by the GCF Committee, consisting of about 25 members representing the breadth of bodies to which the GCF relates (A list of the members can be found at: www.globalchristianforum.org/committee.html). A Secretary coordinates implementation of the Forum vision with assistance of a small staff. A full list of GCF events can be found on its website: www.globalchristianforum.org

2.2. A Set of Practices and Processes for the Journey Together

The most important practice in the development of the GCF and in its meetings is the telling of faith stories.

It was discovered that this approach enabled the full participation of those Christian communities in which sharing testimonies occurs regularly, including notably Pentecostal, Evangelical and African Instituted churches whose experience the GCF has sought especially to include. In these communities, the stories are a means to spread the Gospel, seeking through one's own story of conversion and God's continuing faithfulness to encourage and strengthen the faith of others in their praise and service of God. All members are recognized to have a story; testimonies are not reserved to those with special position. (See Sidebar 4)

In the GCF setting, faith stories brought together those who practiced this way of sharing regularly with those who found it unfamiliar or even somewhat uncomfortable. But experience with the practice has brought a new recognition that sharing such stories has long been part of many traditions. While forms differ, diverse Christian traditions in many cultures engage in the practice of identifying the actions of God in the life of individuals and communities, as the 'lives of the saints' have shown from earliest times. Through telling life stories of exemplars of holy faithfulness from this present time as well as the past, Christians bear witness that God is still working in our midst and can be helped to claim their own calling to be saints. (The New Testament writings frequently so designate the followers of Jesus Christ, e.g. Acts 9:32, Romans 1:7, Hebrews 13:24.) To identify the actions of God in our own lives and communities can be a spiritual practice in which Christians shaped by diverse traditions participate together. Sharing faith stories within the Forum invites us into broader experiences of this practice as they lead us back to the continuing guidance of the Word of God.

The distinctiveness in GCF faith sharing is found in the scope of diversity among the stories which are shared at every meeting. In sharing stories with one another in such intentional breadth of company, each person encounters fresh perspectives, challenges, and insights. Hearing from others, and knowing one is heard by others, can also enrich each participant's grasp of their own faith journeys. This experience bears witness that the space for listening to each other and listening together allows the Spirit to be heard in new ways.

Most characteristically, the personal faith stories told in GCF settings include relating the parts played by faith communities, and the stories of communities themselves are also told. Our capacity to grow in understanding other traditions is enhanced by hearing participants reflect from their own perspectives and theological and ecclesial priorities, and in their own terms. As with individual narratives, when these ecclesial stories are told together, they are changed: in interaction with others, they are both told and heard in new ways. From stories of particular Christian communities a growing sense of common ground and shared direction can emerge, with the Holy Spirit bringing new life and vitality.

The Forum's experience has shown that this faith sharing strengthens mutual trust. Regional and local meetings in particular have then been able to take up the commitment of the Guiding Purpose Statement to 'face together common challenges.' The agenda is designed to invite this sharing: it is deliberately left open and flexible to invite participants to identify those concerns they want to highlight.

Hearing from one another about the issues that challenge them, participants can find themselves stimulated to 'bear one another's burdens, and in this way to fulfil the law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2). It has been found that when there is deep spiritual sharing that spans cultures and continents, and includes honesty about the experiences of suffering, this in itself helps bring a deeper understanding of injustice.

(Sidebar 4)

Beginning gatherings by inviting participants to share something of their faith stories was a breakthrough for the GCF. It has become the most prominent characteristic of GCF meetings. With experience, the Forum has found ways to invite all participants to give voice to their stories of faith within this new setting. The invitation is to tell of one's 'encounter with Christ'; this format is expansive enough for participants to use the structure and words which are appropriate for them. 'Guidelines for faith sharing' offer the Forum's experience of this practice so it may be adapted and used more widely: www.globalchristianforum.org

Generally, participants move from faith sharing to identifying shared matters confronting them which are priorities for their own contexts, and then examine them together. From this, they have often then gone on to reflect on some of the most divisive issues which lie between them. These conversations have been honest, searching, and contextually specific. To find ways to move them forward remains a pressing concern for the Forum's future work. Through addressing both common concerns and issues that divide, participants may make commitments to continue in dialogue or take other further steps together, often beyond the Forum.

Other practices common to GCF gatherings also work together to create the space for encounter and change. We share in morning and evening prayer, which sometimes is offered from different traditions, providing a rich experience of diverse ways of prayer and praise. On other occasions, the use of a common form, such as one reflecting the practice of the Taizé Community, raises every voice to God together. With ample time for meals and conversations over breaks, opportunity is created for people to form new ties and relationships, perhaps with someone from the same church family but another continent or from another tradition but the same language. The experience of these practices multiplies the shared moments of narrating the heart of one's faith in a circle of the widest possible diversity of Christian communities. In this context, even the familiar practice of Bible study gains new depth, as insights emerge from interactions across such diverse communities of faith.

Above all, it has been the practice of Forum meetings always to emphasise the continuing work of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. The basis for all GCF commitment to walking together has come from confident recognition that we all journey with Jesus Christ, and it is he who journeys with all of us and whose presence can be seen in our communities.

3. Moving Forward: The Continuing Journey

Many participants in GCF meetings have reported that they were surprised by the intensity of their new experience of 'receiving one another as Christ also received us' (Romans 15:7 AV). They have wanted to continue to grow in closer relationship as they return to the communities they represent, and to encourage others also to make this journey with them. As it seeks God's future, the Forum increasingly is attentive to ways of supporting this growing vision.

First, acknowledging that there are many Christian communities not represented in the Forum, the GCF continues to ask who is not at the table, and to explore how to expand the representation of those not present.

Second, recognising that its years of experience have yielded significant practical wisdom, the GCF nurtures expanded access through sharing its methods more widely. It is directly accompanying various geographic and thematic initiatives, as well as developing resources to assist the use of GCF practices in a variety of contexts. These resources include in particular stories of transformation and online information and tool-kits.

Third, appreciating the theological weight and significance borne in the Forum process by its varied forms of sharing faith experiences, the Forum will continue further to discern, articulate and own the theological and ecclesiological insights which are emerging on its journey. (See *Sidebar 5*) This discernment will involve both self-reflection and ongoing engagement with other Christian bodies which seek to learn from, challenge, and build upon what is being learned in the GCF.

Fourth, while remaining confident that it already makes a distinctive and valuable

(Sidebar 5)

One effort to fulfill the commitment in the Guiding Purpose Statement to 'engage in theological reflection in areas of mutual concern', was the formation of the broadly constituted theological working group to write these reflections, which were presented to the GCF Committee for its approval in September 2013. The working group was composed of these members:

Wonsuk MA, Chair (Pentecostal, Korea & United Kingdom); Kathryn JOHNSON, Secretary (Lutheran, USA); K. M. GEORGE (Oriental Orthodox, India); Rolf HILLE (Evangelical, Germany); Leonid KISHKOVSKY (Eastern Orthodox, USA); Luis MELO, Catholic (Canada and Vatican City); Thomas ODURO (African Instituted, Ghana); Sarah ROWLAND JONES (Anglican, South Africa); and Calixto SALVATIERRI MORENO (Catholic, Bolivia). Also joining in the work in addition to John GIBAUT (Anglican, Canada and Switzerland), as consultant, were GCF staff Kim CAIN (Australia); Hubert VAN BEEK (France), and Larry MILLER (France).

contribution towards Christian unity through providing space for mutual recognition of Christ's presence and Christian commitment among participants, the Forum seeks to listen to the Spirit's guidance about other issues and arenas where its resources might prove helpful (*See Sidebar 6*)

Finally, the GCF also seeks more intentionally to equip and support its participants as they continue to respond to the work of the Spirit in their own settings. The Forum will encourage them, as well as their churches and communities, to explore the wider implications of the GCF experience for the sake of the unity of God's people so that the world may believe.

While the Forum process will be communicated through a variety of means, its capacity to capture the imagination of Christians and their communities comes first through a direct experience of its life: one person witnessing to another how God is acting in the life of the Church. Hence, the primary means of promoting the GCF and its aims comes through the invitation to participate in its events. The best way to encounter and understand what 'good comes out of' the GCF is to 'come and see' (John 1:46).

The Message from the second GCF global gathering in 2011 in Manado supported these directions for the future:

We experience the open space in the Global Christian Forum as a gift of God. In a fragmented world and church, this unique expression of unity...is a source of inspiration and hope.... We know that God's Spirit draws the body of Christ into unity for the sake of God's mission in the world. So we commit ourselves to nurture the Global Christian Forum, as the Spirit leads, as witness to God's saving and transforming love.

Global Christian Forum Committee
September 2013

(*Sidebar 6*)

Several common challenges were identified at the two global gatherings and a number of regional meetings. The Forum is now looking at how the contexts of trust developed in its meetings could become settings for examining complex and sensitive matters, both regionally and globally. The first is an initiative to pursue conversations on 'Christian witness in a world of many Christian families of faith'. In the second, the Forum is inviting the churches to consider a common response to the situations of those Christian sisters and brothers suffering persecution because of their faith. In both of these initiatives, the GCF will work with a broad range of partners, seeking a complementary role that builds on the Forum's distinctive gifts.