



Global Christian Forum
Global Gathering
April 23-28 2018, Bogota, Colombia

Let mutual love continue (Heb 13:1)

1. Mutual love

“Let mutual love continue.” The theme of our gathering points to the spiritual heart of the Global Christian Forum. Mutual love has been motivation, shared attitude and practice of those participating in the GCF. Respecting and recognizing each other as sisters and brothers in Christ has been the basis of our togetherness and has sustained us on our way that has both its origin and goal in the love of the Triune God. Mutual love flows from the fact that we are all created in the image of God; we are called and sent by Jesus Christ; and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s mission.

“Let mutual love continue.” The theme shall accompany us when we go home to our communities and workplaces as disciples of Christ. Mutual love must affect our behaviour and attitudes as we continue our journey together in different directions.

Hebrews 13 combines mutual brotherly and sisterly love – in Greek *philadelphia* - immediately with love of the stranger and hospitality – in Greek *philoxenia*: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Heb 13:2). Mutual love cannot be reserved to my community, to my faith tradition or nation. It flows out of God’s love for this world like the rivers of life in the beautiful image of the new creation in the book of the Revelation to John. The bond of love that unites us as disciples of Christ in one body has its horizon in the unity of one human family and of God’s creation.

Jesus says in chapter 17 of the Gospel of John: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” and “that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” We betray the love of God and the gift of unity in Christ, if we continue to witness and act separately instead of walking, praying and working as pilgrims together. We betray the love of God and the gift of

unity in Christ if our witness and mission remain untouched by the suffering of marginalized and poor people around us, and deaf to the silent cries of creation.

I will unfold now this praise of mutual love in three dimensions:

let us remember the first steps to create the Global Christian Forum and the vision that brought it to life;

let us recall that oneness in Christ means participating in God's mission to reconcile and heal the world;

let us look around and remind ourselves of the relevance of a common witness of Christians for reconciliation and peace here in Colombia.

2. The 20th anniversary of the first steps to create the Global Christian Forum

2018 is a year of anniversaries for the World Council of Churches. We are celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the WCC in Amsterdam. We are remembering the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Uppsala assembly. This assembly responded to the calls especially of WCC member churches from the global South to address more actively poverty, marginalization, racism and other forms of violence. Taking a stance in the divisions and conflicts of this world was costly for the fellowship of churches in the WCC. The WCC was heavily criticized. But at the same time, the fellowship grew together in a more truthful engagement for justice, reconciliation and peace. We are remembering also the Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women which was initiated 35 years ago at the 1983 Vancouver assembly and culminated 20 years ago at the 1998 Harare assembly. Churches were challenged to show what it means to be just and inclusive communities of women and men.

It was also in August 1998 before the Harare assembly that a group of 28 visionary and committed people met at the Ecumenical Institute at Château de Bossey, near Geneva to develop a proposal for a "forum of Christian churches and ecumenical organizations". They represented the WCC, Christian world communions, regional ecumenical organizations, national councils of churches, international ecumenical organizations and churches that were not associated with ecumenical structures from Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions. They recognized that fellowship in Christ transcends membership in a fellowship of churches such as the WCC.

They took steps to create a new space of encounter and dialogue. The intention was to broaden the circle beyond existing structures, but not to create a new movement. The constitutional basis of the WCC was to become the common ground for participation in the forum they envisaged. They declared: "Participation will be based on confessing the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and seeking to fulfil together the common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

They presented their vision in the form of goals and objectives. They said:

The proposed forum is *possible* because of the unity which is already given in Christ. It is *called* for because of our common faith in a reconciling God whose church knows itself summoned to become God's reconciled and reconciling people.

...The forum will not speak for the participating bodies, but will provide a way for them, transcending the limitations of existing frameworks, to think new thoughts, dream new dreams, and glimpse new visions.

Seeking to be open to the charisma the Spirit gives to Christ's people, the forum's style will be open, expectant and relying on a minimum of rules and structures. One condition for participation < not membership>, therefore, is a willingness to accept other participants as bona fide partners in dialogue, the aim of which is to strengthen the obedience of all to Christ.

The occasional gatherings of the forum will provide opportunities for worship, exploration of matters of common Christian concern and development of enhanced mutual understanding. They are not conceived as decision-making, programme-initiating or document-producing events. However, they might lead to new forms of cooperation.

I am quoting this proposal because it entails already all the elements that were later spelled out with a stronger emphasis on mission in the purpose statement of the GCF that was shared tentatively with the WCC assembly 2006 in Porto Alegre and endorsed by the first GCF global gathering held in Limuru, Kenya, in 2007.

The story of the GCF is a remarkable success story of building trust among participants and opening ways for new forms of cooperation. This was visible for a worldwide audience in the greetings shared with the delegates of the WCC assembly 2013 in Busan. Never before, was such a wide-range of Christian leaders present in such an event. The effect of the GCF has been seen in notably improved and more extensive relations and cooperation between partners that had few or difficult relations before. The need to address our common challenges and our common call to witness and service has been strongly affirmed. One of the most exciting results of broadened participation encouraged by the GCF was the document on "Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World" that was jointly presented to the public by the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, the WCC and the World Evangelical Alliance.

Together on the way, we encountered also certain challenges, particularly in the understanding of the tasks of this Forum, and the limits of those tasks. Representatives of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the World Pentecostal Fellowship (WPF) and the WCC met last year in Bossey to take stock of our journey together in the past two decades. They affirmed the character of the GCF as a shared space, a forum, gathering people to build relations, to address issues of common concern and interest and to stimulate better relations between partners involved. It would be utterly misleading to look at it as an organization or a group with the mandate to pursue alternative ecumenism or make statements on behalf of the partners.

I am confident that we will experience again here in Bogota the great gift of the GCF for building trust, renewing the commitment to cooperation and experiencing the bond of mutual love in Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

3. Being one in Christ, called to common witness and service

Being one in Christ, we are called to common witness and service. I would like to recall the experience of the pioneers of the ecumenical movement.

“Let mutual love continue” (Heb 13:1) corresponds to Roman 15:7 “receive one another as Christ received you, for the glory of God.” Those Christians who began more than a century ago to call the churches to unity in the faith once delivered to the apostles and saints (Jude 3) made a precious spiritual experience as they gathered together. They realized that in spite of their past church divisions they found each other in a real though imperfect communion in and through the Spirit of God who is the giver of life and communion (*koinonia*). They rediscovered in a new way that Christ is not divided (1 Cor 1:13); and because Christ is not divided there can be but One Body of Christ, One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Not two. Not many.

They started moving together, ready to share their own experience of communion in the love of Christ amidst division. They followed their vision, making the gift they experienced visible by crossing denominational borders and calling Christians and their communities to repentance from persistent divisions among them. This was the beginning of the ecumenical movement.

They could have been satisfied with the experience of mutual love among themselves at the personal and individual level, but they went beyond that. The love of Christ compelled them (2 Cor 5:14) to call the churches to overcome isolation and to begin encountering each other in dialogue, mutual intercession, mutual support and mutual accountability as expressions of mutual love.

In this spirit, they began to move forward and realized their common calling. They became pilgrims of justice and peace in the world. Christ prayed for the unity of his disciples not only for their own sake but for the sake of the world (John 17:21). According to Scriptures, Christ in his reign will bring a broken and fragmented world into a just peace. If the head of the One Body is also the first born of all creation (Col 1:15); if he is the one who will lead creation to its fullness (Eph 1:10), it follows that the search for church unity is inseparable from the struggle against the systemic forces that cause poverty, racism, sexism and marginalization.

These have been some of the basic theological convictions that led 70 years ago to the fellowship of churches, which is the WCC. In parallel, however, World Christianity was changing and growing especially in the global South. New expressions of Christian faith emerged, new churches and communions developed that did not share the same experience and convictions. In the process that led to the GCF, we were reminded that the fellowship in Christ exists beyond those who were committed to the fellowship of churches in the WCC.

Keeping all this in mind, we realize that the calling of the GCF is to celebrate the blessing of being gathered in Christ by the Spirit in such a way, that we can embrace each other and the communities and churches we belong to regardless of our views on each other's churches and on visible church unity. We cherish the gift of mutual love; we reject proselytism; we refrain from

condemning each other; we welcome mutual support and admonition, because we are not our own: by belonging to Christ, and by belonging to Christ we belong to each other. The calling of the GCF is to help Christians from very different cultural and confessional traditions to discern the urgency of manifesting the unity in Christ and the fundamental unity of humanity in a world increasingly separated by walls.

4. Praying and working for reconciliation and peace in Colombia

If mutual love is the spiritual heart of the GCF, being one in Christ and being called to common witness and service to the world are our shared convictions. Since we are gathering in Bogota, I would like to explore what this practically means in the context of Colombia.

We hope and pray that the peace process in Colombia will continue and will lead to just peace for the people of this country who have suffered from violence and war for more than 60 years. Colombia is a priority country for the WCC in Latin America. We are working closely together with our member church, the Presbyterian Church of Colombia (PCC) and our local partners Justapaz of the Mennonite Church and the ecumenical platform DiPAZ, the Interchurch Dialogue for Peace.

We recently organized together with them four pilgrim team visits to different regions of the country to listen to people, community and church leaders and government officials how they experience the present situation. The visits have shown that this is a very critical moment in the Colombian peace process. We also organized meetings of our Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace Reference Group in Bogota and of the WCC Commission on International Affairs in Cartagena with the presence of Colombian President HE Juan Manuel Santos.

While the peace accord has been signed by the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) after six years of negotiations in Cuba, the negotiations with the ELN are still in process, and other smaller guerilla groups have not been directly addressed. Additionally, responsibilities for paramilitary groups have not been adequately upheld. Various reports have demonstrated that violence is still prevalent in many areas with the killing of community leaders. Displaced people who want to return to their land are being threatened and attacked. The current post peace-agreement context in Colombia sees a unique Truth Commission (TC) that seeks to examine the root causes of complex situations of violence. But other points of the peace accord are only partially implemented, and the government does not deliver on all of its promises.

Solidarity has to be demonstrated along with the need to give hope to those who are struggling. The Presbyterian Church and the Mennonite Church support the peace process because many of their members and congregations have suffered, especially those in the countryside and within entire communities that were victims of war. In these communities, people were displaced and persecuted. Families and pastors were overwhelmed by the conflict at the hands of different actors. The war went on without discriminating between the civilian population and armed actors. These communities are longing for peace and the fulfilment of the prophecy of Micah: God “shall judge between many peoples and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they

shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken” (Mic 4:3-4). This is the Micah-challenge today in Colombia.

We are extremely grateful that DiPaz includes many different churches and church-based organizations in Colombia, among them the ecumenical officer of the Roman Catholic Conference of Bishops of Colombia and the Pastoral Service of the Assemblies of God. DiPaz has also international members such as the WCC, ACT Alliance and other member churches and partners of the WCC. This broad ecumenical cooperation is very encouraging. But we also have to acknowledge that among the churches are many voices which rejected the peace accord.

Despite the efforts of DiPaz, part of the population looks with suspicion at churches that are not reconciled among themselves and sometimes argue against each other. We cannot be content with polite ecumenism or nice individual relationships at the expense of the difficult issues that prevent our witness from being relevant. Ours is the ministry of reconciliation. “Let mutual love continue” – also when we address the issues that are still separating us so that we come closer and closer to each other because we come closer and closer to Christ among us.

The apostle Paul reminds us: in his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5, verses 17-21:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors of Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:17-21).

Thanks be to God! Amen

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