

The Church and the Spirit

The Experience of the Global Christian Forum

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Paper presented at the EPCRA conference in Riga, Latvia, Nov. 2-5,2011

For an ecumenist looking back at recent church history, the twentieth century has been the century of the Ecumenical Movement. But many ecumenists tend to forget, or simply ignore, that it has also been the century of the Pentecostal / Charismatic Movement. "Edinburgh 1910" and "Azusa Street 1906" are two events at the start of the same century, that have given rise to movements which have each deeply affected the life and witness of the churches all through the century. Both understand themselves as movements of the Spirit. This is obvious for the Pentecostal movement which by its very nature is Spirit-driven and has all the outward characteristics of Spirit dynamics. It may seem less explicit for the ecumenical movement, with its predilection for academic soberness and theological expertise. Yet in its deep self, the ecumenical movement firmly believes that the extraordinary renewal it has witnessed in so many churches and among so many Christians, is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The ecumenical movement evolved from the 19th century missionary movement. No need to remind us that "Edinburgh 1910" was first and foremost a world missionary conference. The concern for unity was but an offshoot, yet it became the main focus and John 17 : 21 the motto. "Azusa Street 1906" was a revival, marked by the expectation that the whole church would be immersed, and thereby united, in this experience of the outpouring of the Spirit. Its focus became mission, and its motto Mathew 28 : 19 – the Great Commission.

The two movements have been contemporaneous – but parallel. They have grown and expanded over the same period of time – yet largely in isolation from one another. At best they have ignored each other, at worst they have entertained opposition and conflict, fuelled by misrepresentation and mutual accusations. While it is correct to say that both have had a major impact on the churches and have changed the face of world Christianity in the twentieth century, they have not impacted the same churches and the same sectors of Christianity. The terrain (playing field) of the ecumenical movement has been that of the traditional / historic churches – Protestant / Anglican / Orthodox, later also Catholic. Rightly or wrongly they were

(and still are) perceived as the centre of Christianity, and the locus of institutional ecclesial power. Although the ecumenical movement has been a challenge, and thereby a threat, to these institutions and their power, it could operate at the centre because some of its most outstanding proponents were persons holding key positions in the institutions, who commanded trust and respect. Pentecostalism on the contrary, has been on the periphery of established Christianity, not by choice, but because it was pushed to the margins right from the beginning. The least one can say is that as a movement of the periphery, Pentecostalism has done remarkably well. It is in the process of turning the margins into the new, or a least a new, centre of Christianity, and has built its own power base.

The twentieth century has not been totally without attempts to bridge the gap between the two movements. David du Plessis has tried hard. On the Catholic side, he and Killian McDonnell, a scholar interested in the Catholic Charismatic renewal, were at the origin of the Roman Catholic – Pentecostal Dialogue, as early as 1972. With the WCC, du Plessis' efforts did not yield any comparable result. This is probably due to the fact that the WCC in the period up until the 1980s was doing so well that it did not perceive any need for a conversation with Pentecostals. It had received into membership, as early as of 1961, a few small, ecumenically minded Pentecostal churches from Latin America, but this too had not brought about a perspective towards the broader phenomenon of Pentecostalism. That began somewhat to change when some of its member churches (Protestant, Anglican) were touched by the Charismatic movement. The WCC conducted a dialogue with the Charismatic renewal movement from 1978 to 1984¹, through its Subunit on Renewal and Congregational Life. But, although worthwhile in itself, this did not lead to any breakthrough in the relationships with the Pentecostal movement as a whole, or rather the lack thereof.

Notwithstanding the poor record of relationships, not to speak of interaction, between the two movements that have marked so profoundly the churches in the past century, the Spirit has used both to bring renewal. The ecumenical movement has challenged and changed the ecclesiological self-understanding of the historic churches, especially Protestant and Anglican, but also Catholic and Orthodox. Some have taken the consequences to the point of dissolving themselves into new, united churches, e.g. the creation of the Church of South India in 1947, and numerous other examples. Explicitly or implicitly, the study on Baptism,

¹ *The Church is Charismatic. The World Council of Churches and the Charismatic Renewal*. Edited by Arnold Bittlinger. World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1981

Eucharist and Ministry has opened the way for a great number of mutual agreements on the recognition of baptism, admission to the eucharist, exchange of ministers, the episcopacy etc. The current emphasis of Faith and Order on ecclesiology is not incidental, but is the fruit of more than 75 years of consistent and obedient theological probing into the far corners of doctrinal differences.

Seen from the same ecclesiological point of view, and quite on the contrary, the Pentecostal movement has brought extreme fragmentation. But that is only half of the story. The other half is that, from a missiological vantage point, it has brought unprecedented growth, in numbers, but also in the spiritual life of countless Christians.

How to interpret a situation in the church where the Spirit has visibly been at work in movements of unity, mission and renewal that have been a blessing to their respective constituencies, and yet have ignored each other, opposed one another, and have such a poor history of working towards mutual understanding ? Could it be that the Holy Spirit has moved in such apparently confusing ways in the twentieth century, that we, at the dawn of the 21st, are left with an inextricable pattern of division of which we cannot make much sense ?²

The answer to that question lies probably in the old saying that "the Spirit blows where it wills". To say that the Spirit blows where it wills is not an easy shortcut that saves us the trouble of theological investigation. It is in fact a confession, a statement of faith, an acknowledgement of our fundamental inability to comprehend the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. The action of the Spirit is to be recognized through the fruits it produces, it is a matter of reading the signs, of discernment, most of the time in retrospect. What are some of these signs, when one looks at the recent developments between the ecumenical movement and the Pentecostal movement ?

In 1988, the Central Committee of the WCC decided that the theme of the Seventh Assembly, that was going to be held in 1991 in Canberra, Australia, would be "Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation". Breaking with a tradition of christological assembly topics, the Council opted for a pneumatological theme. That, I believe, is one of those signs telling us that the Spirit was at work. "Canberra" has gone into the collective Pentecostal

² See my article 'Pentecostals-Ecumenicals Dialogue' in *Fruitful in this Land. Pluralism, Dialogue and Healing in Migrant Pentecostalism*. Edited by André Droogers, Cornelis van der Laan and Wout van Laar, Boekencentrum, Netherlands, 2006.

memory as a paradigm of WCC's theological ambiguity because of the controversial presentation on the theme by the Korean professor Chung Hyun Kyung. Or, of ecumenical syncretism, as the participants at the opening service walked through the smoke of the welcoming ritual of the Aboriginals. Pentecostals are much less aware that Canberra has been the first assembly at which relationships with the reality of the Pentecostal movement have featured prominently in the work of one of the sections. That could happen because the sub-theme of that section was "Spirit of Unity – Reconcile Your People !".

A few years earlier, a new "Mr. Pentecost" had begun to attend ecumenical gatherings, Pentecostal theologian Cecil M. Robeck. How that happened – that is also a story of the Spirit at work, this time on the Pentecostal side. Mel has told his story on a number of occasions, I will not do that here for him. Suffice it to say that he was at the Canberra assembly, that he was assigned to that section on unity, that he had the skills and the knowledge to spell out what the section should say about Pentecostal relations, and that he was listened to.³ Canberra was also the assembly at which plans for a new relationships policy of the WCC were brought to fruition.

All of this meant that following the Canberra assembly, the conditions were in place for a program of the WCC aiming at building relationships with Pentecostal, as well as Evangelical and other independent churches and groups, outside the membership of the WCC. On the Pentecostal side, the network of young scholars formed by Mel Robeck was going to serve as the initial resource for Pentecostal participation in response to the program.

In other words, the two ends at which the Spirit had been at work, ecumenical and Pentecostal, were coming together, and that made it possible for something new to happen.

Looking back at this period, which coincided with the last decade of the twentieth century, it is striking to see how the Spirit used on the one hand the institutional assets – and flexibility – of the WCC (assembly theme, section work, programmatic work authorized by the governing bodies, etc.), and on the other hand the strength of the Pentecostal movement, which is to allow individual Pentecostals to respond to the call they perceive, even if it is seemingly in

³ *Signs of the Spirit. Official Report Seventh Assembly.* Edited by Michael Kinnamon. World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1991.

contradiction with generally admitted principles⁴. Similar patterns can be detected in the area of Faith and Order, whether at the level of the WCC, the Conference of European Churches, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA and probably in other settings as well, where the institutional and the personal charisma have interacted in ways beneficial to both sides.

The work that was done in the last part of the twentieth century has laid the ground for two broad streams of action that will alter the landscape of ecumenical / pentecostal relationships in decisive and lasting ways : consultative and theological dialogues (with the WCC, the World Alliance – now Communion – of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, soon the Orthodox Churches), and the Global Christian Forum.

I will elaborate further on the latter, the Global Christian Forum. And I would like to do that keeping in mind the theme of this conference, namely that there are always two actors: the Church and the Spirit. There is only one Church, that is you and me, the WCC, the Pentecostals, and all the others with whom, together, we are church. And there is only one Spirit, the one we are all called to drink of (I Cor. 12 :13).

It is not by accident that the Global Christian Forum began to take shape at the close of the twentieth century. It is not by accident either that it emerged from within the ecumenical movement, and more specifically, from within the WCC, and not from the Pentecostal / Charismatic movement (or the Evangelical movement, for that matter). Sooner or later, the ecumenical movement *had* to grapple with the fact that its vision of a global fellowship embracing all Christian churches, had not come true. That happened on the occasion of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the WCC, in 1998. Coming at the end of the century, it was an invitation to look back, not just fifty years, but all the way to where it began. The obvious observation was that the "ecclesial landscape", or to put it more bluntly, world Christianity, had undergone dramatic changes between 1910 and 1998. Whereas Pentecostalism was virtually unknown at the start of the ecumenical movement it now represented, together with the Charismatic renewal, 25% of Christianity. Another important observation was that the World Evangelical Alliance, which had been a weak body ever since

⁴ Robeck's involvement with the ecumenical movement was in total contradiction with the By-laws of the Assemblies of God USA, his denomination, but the leadership allowed him to act in his personal capacity.

it was resurrected in 1951, was beginning to impose itself as a major actor of world Christianity at the global level.

And thirdly, the Catholic Church, in spite of the hope and expectations since Vatican II, had not joined the membership of the WCC and would not do so in any foreseeable future.

These considerations brought the then general secretary of the WCC, Konrad Raiser, to the conclusion that a new initiative was necessary, to provide a platform where all the churches could be invited to gather. His initial proposal was that the WCC should create such a platform, by opening up its assembly to churches outside its membership. But this went too far for the governing bodies of the WCC. As an alternative solution, Raiser then suggested the idea of a *Forum*, in which the WCC and its member churches would participate together with the other major sectors of Christianity, e.g. the Catholic Church, the Pentecostal / Charismatic churches and groups, the WEA with its constituency etc. A forum, i.e. a space for *participation*, not a new membership organization, not a new ecumenical body in the place of the WCC, but something like a new avenue, opening up the possibility of a new beginning, a fresh start, in a situation that otherwise offered no longer a perspective for any significant broadening and re-modeling of the ecumenical landscape.

The WCC went about starting the Forum as it would do with any other new programmatic proposal: it convened a consultation, which brought together a group of people who were asked to come up with a plan. They did, and they also formed a small committee, called Continuation Committee, and gave it the task to implement the plan. But the story really begins when that committee sat down to do its work. It did *not* start implementing the plan – instead, it asked itself: what are we here for, what is it that we are asked to do, do we really need this? And the first thing it decided was: let us listen to those for whom this new thing is meant to come into being, i.e. the Pentecostals, the Evangelicals. Do they want this at all? Do they think it's needed? And so, the committee invited a group of Pentecostal and Evangelical leaders for an extended week-end, and laid out the plan. If their answer had been: no, we do not think there is any point in sitting with the WCC, with the Catholics, the Orthodox, the mainline Protestants, after a century of rejection and prejudices I think there would not have been a Global Christian Forum today. But the answer was: *yes*, we *do* need something of this kind, we do need to talk to each other, it's about time to get over our divisions of the past century.

Those who were present at that conversation were in no way mandated to represent the church, and yet, in a sense they were the church, because in that conversation they drank of the same, one Spirit, the Spirit of unity and reconciliation. That's a bold statement – and I can only say it because the fruit of the conversation was to clear the way for a process of unity and reconciliation to begin (or to continue, it all depends where you situate the beginning). The signs of the Spirit are its fruits – and there is no doubt that unity and reconciliation *are* the work of the Spirit.

I do not want to bother you here with a chronological, factual presentation of what happened next, and how the Global Christian Forum evolved from that early stage to where it is now, just about a month after its second global gathering, in Manado, Indonesia. I would rather like to share with you some of the main features of that journey.

First of all, it has indeed been, and continues to be, a *journey* – but of a peculiar kind. Usually when one goes on a journey one knows what the destination is, where one is headed for. There may be surprises on the way, or obstacles that could not be foreseen, but there is a goal. The Global Christian Forum does not know where the end-station of its journey lies, it has no blue-print of what it wants to achieve. It is a step-by-step journey, open-ended.

Secondly, to say that the Forum has no pre-established goal does not mean that it has no *purpose*. On the contrary, the purpose of the journey is clearly stated. It is to provide a *space* – an open space – where the proponents of the ecumenical movement and those of the evangelical and pentecostal / charismatic movements can meet in mutual trust. In other words, a space where indeed *all* the Christian traditions can come together, to engage in dialogue, to seek greater Christian unity, and to confront common issues. The Forum is an instrument – new and unique – in the search for Christian unity and common witness of the churches.

Thirdly, the Global Christian Forum is in itself a movement, a *process*. When it began, there was fear that it would almost inevitably lead to the creation of a new ecumenical institution or organization, one that could even enter into competition with existing bodies, such as the WCC. The risk remains, even today, but the journey so far has shown that it is possible to retain the movement character. The Forum is basically *provisional*. When it will have achieved its purpose it can go out of business. It has no need to perpetuate or institutionalize itself.

Along the journey, some important discoveries have been made. One of these is the impact of individual faith stories. Each Forum meeting begins with a time of sharing, in which the participants are invited to say freely, in their own words, how they came to the faith, what it means for them, and what changes the encounter with Christ has brought in their life. This was never planned as a methodology. It was experimented in the first Forum consultation (2002), because those in charge were looking for a way to bring Christians from such widely diverging backgrounds in conversation with one another. In the experience of the Forum, this sharing of faith stories creates a basis of mutual trust and confidence for the meeting to proceed. It is often cited by participants as the highlight of the meeting.

Another early discovery which became a feature of Forum meetings was to allow for ample representation of pentecostal and evangelical constituencies. To invite a few to an event in which the majority is made up of ecumenical professionals, even with the best intentions, puts Pentecostals and Evangelicals in a defensive position. Recognizing that the Forum is about bringing into conversation two movements – ecumenical and evangelical / pentecostal – a principle of equity was adopted: half of the participants Pentecostals and Evangelicals, the other half from the ‘historic’ traditions (Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican / Protestant). This has been applied to all Forum events up to today. Following the second global gathering of October 2011, some discussion has begun as to whether the rule should be somewhat adjusted, to allow for a more balanced ecumenical representation. No decisions have been taken yet, but the basic intention of "equal footing" will be maintained.

The stated purpose of the GCF is also a fruit of the journey at its early stages. It was not imposed from outside or above, but formulated and proposed by a small drafting group in that same first consultation. The participants adopted it as a *provisional* purpose statement, and at the first global gathering in 2007 the same text was affirmed as the *guiding* purpose statement. It reads:

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.

Re-affirming again the guiding purpose, the second global gathering added: "We have heard the Spirit calling us, not only to continue to foster respect for one another, but now also to

move forward together exploring and addressing common challenges"⁵. This testimony is a typical illustration of how the Forum seeks to discern what the next steps on its journey should be, in obedience to what the Spirit is saying.

Forum consultations and meetings have an open agenda. Participants are invited to bring to the table the priorities and concerns of their constituencies, and to select through a participatory process a small number of issues for in-depth discussion in groups. The larger global gatherings follow a more established program, with a theme, speakers, etc., but as much space as possible is kept for creative participation. The overall priority however has been, and continues to be, the building and nurturing of relationships, globally, regionally and at national levels. Encouraged by the outcome of the Manado gathering, as reflected in the Message and the Guidelines⁶, the GCF Committee is now considering to also initiate Forum meetings focussing on thematic issues.

As a movement, the Forum is essentially a process based on *participation*, primarily of churches from the widest possible range of Christian traditions. It has gradually embraced all the major global church bodies, including the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Vatican), the Orthodox Churches (Eastern and Oriental), the Protestant World Communions (e.g. Baptist, Disciples, Friends, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Reformed, Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventist), the Anglican Communion, the Organization of African Instituted Churches, etc. This broad representation is reflected in the composition of its international committee. The Forum continues to broaden the participation by inviting more churches belonging to these traditions to join. At the same time, it also reaches out to other parts of the Christian family that as yet have not been involved in the process, e.g. mega churches, new charismatic churches, non-denominational churches and groups, etc.

A posture of "listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev. ch. 2 and 3) is central to the self-understanding of the Forum. It was the explicit theme of one of the

⁵ Message from the Second Global Gathering of the Global Christian Forum, 4 – 7 October 2011, Manado, Indonesia. See www.globalchristianforum.org

⁶ Guidelines from the Second Global Gathering of the Global Christian Forum, 4 – 7 October 2011, Manado, Indonesia. See www.globalchristianforum.org

plenaries and group discussion at the Manado gathering. On that occasion, a new form of sharing stories was experimented, in addition to, and as an expansion of the telling of individual faith stories. Five "community stories" of churches and faith communities from different parts of the world were presented, illustrating how the voice of the Spirit is listened to, and understood in community, in various local situations. Although this was a first and tentative attempt of the Forum to add a 'collective' dimension to faith stories, the Message of Manado speaks of it as "one of the most poignant moments" of the four day event. It is hoped that the sharing of community stories may become a new and powerful feature of the Forum. Its power lies in the fact that discerning the voice of the Spirit as community, as church, is more than the sum total of individual faith stories.

In recent years, the Forum has increasingly become aware of the enormous changes that are taking place in world Christianity today. The shift to the global South of Christianity's center of gravity, the exponential growth of the Pentecostal movement, the emergence of new charismatic churches, of mega churches, of non-denominational churches and other new forms of being church, the decline in membership of the historic Protestant churches in the old Christian heartland of Europe and the rise of 'migrant' churches, all of these call for renewed approaches to the biblical imperatives of Christian unity and common witness. The Forum has begun to engage these new realities at the recent Manado gathering, convinced as it is that the voice of the Spirit to the church global can no longer be heard – let alone understood – without discerning the changes that will shape the church of the 21st century.

Having in mind the theme of this conference, the Church and the Spirit, it would not be appropriate to conclude without saying a word about the Pentecostal response to the Forum. It can best be done by way of a story. At the first global gathering in 2007, Bishop James Leggett, the then President of the Pentecostal World Fellowship was present, but in his capacity as Presiding Bishop of his denomination, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. He stated clearly at his arrival that he was not representing the PWF. On the last but one day the participants agreed that a list of all the churches and organizations present would be appended to the Message that was being drafted. On the morning of the last day Bishop Leggett said to me that he would like to see the Pentecostal World Fellowship listed and asked if publication could be postponed until he had consulted his Executive. I could not grant

such delay because it would have meant ending the conference without making the Message public. At noon-time that same day Bishop Leggett approached me again and said: put us on the list. He and Dr Prince Guneratnam, at that time the Secretary of the PWF Executive⁷, who attended as Senior Pastor of Calvary Church in Kuala Lumpur, had been moved by the Spirit. Soon after the gathering, both of them joined the GCF Committee The Global Christian Forum is full of such stories.

The GCF wants to offer that space where the one church, in all its diversity, can gather together to drink of the one Spirit. Or, as we put it sometimes, where all the diverse parts of the Body of Christ can recognize each other as parts of that one body. As one thinks of it, it is indeed astonishing that at the end of the twentieth century, we had to realize – or rather, the Spirit had to remind us, to open our eyes – that such a space did not exist. I remember five, six years ago, when we were heading towards the first global gathering, one of our committee members kept asking the question: why do we want to convene this gathering – is this really what we should do? are we not much more effective by multiplying the number of small meetings – in the regions – in all sorts of places where Christians from the traditional churches and from the "new" churches are not talking to each other, ignore each other? We were agonizing over it – until the liberating word came: yes, we need to call the leadership together, globally, *because there is no such place*.

In 1986 Pope John-Paul II called the leaders of all the religions of the world together in Assise. It was a bold step that made a lasting impact. But there is no Assise where the Christian leaders can meet – to pray together – to create the space where the Spirit can move – where together, as leaders of the one Church, they can drink of the one Spirit.

⁷ Dr Guneratnam succeeded Bishop Leggett in 2010 as President of the Pentecostal World Fellowship.

