

CEC - Comitato centrale, «Concezione e visione comune del CEC», in *Regno Documenti*, 9/1998, 01/05/1998, 309-316. Sintesi e commento in A. MAFFEIS, *Il dialogo ecumenico*, Queriniana, Brescia 2000, 32-41.

## Self-understanding and vision



At its founding assembly In 1948, WCC member churches understood that the new Council was not a church above them, certainly not the church universal or incipient "world church". They understood it to be an instrument whereby the churches bear witness together in their common allegiance to Jesus Christ, search for that unity which Christ wills for his one and only church, and co-operate in matters which require common statements and actions.

## Membership

What was not clear in 1948 was whether membership of a church in the WCC would have any consequences for the "self-understanding" or ecclesiological position of that church?

To clarify positions, the WCC Central Committee in 1950 adopted the **Toronto statement on "The Church, the Churches, and the World Council of Churches"**.

According to this statement, the WCC "is not and must never become a super-church". It does not negotiate union between churches. It "cannot and should not be based on any one particular conception of the church". Nevertheless, the common witness of the members "must be based on the common recognition that Christ is the divine head of the body", which, "on the basis of the New Testament", is the one church of Christ.

In practice, common WCC membership implies that the churches "should recognize their solidarity with each other, render assistance to each other in case of need, and refrain from such actions as are incompatible with brotherly relationships".

## Purpose

Over the years since the Toronto statement was adopted, the issues it addresses have remained on the agenda of the WCC.

The statement in the **constitution** regarding the purpose of the WCC has developed from the 1948 formulation, "to carry out the work of the world movements for Faith and Order and Life and Work", to the much more specific language of Nairobi (1975), which speaks of calling "the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in the common life of Christ, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe"; to the even more detailed formulation adopted by the Harare assembly (1998):

"The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe".

## CUV

The extensive process of study and consultation "**Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches**" (CUV), launched in 1989 and culminating in the policy document under this title adopted by the Central Committee in 1997, treats the Toronto statement as "foundational for any common understanding of the WCC" (para. 1.12).

It then goes on to note how reflection and discussion over succeeding years have deepened this understanding. At the same time, it observes that "for many people the understanding of the WCC as a living fellowship of churches has emerged more vividly through specific initiatives to engage the churches in reflecting and acting at the local level" (para. 1.15).

In addition, the long chapter on "The Self-Understanding of the World Council of Churches" in the CUV statement picks up the idea of the World Council as an "ecclesiological challenge" to its member churches, noting that while different churches may understand the use of the word "fellowship" in the Council's basis in different ways, the term does at least suggest "that the Council is more than a mere functional association of churches set up to organize activities in areas of common interest" (para. 3.2). The text also outlines some shared understandings of what it means for a church to be a member of the WCC (para. 3.7).

The Central Committee commended the CUV text to the WCC member churches "to encourage and help them to evaluate their own ecumenical commitments and practice"; and the eighth assembly acknowledged it as the "framework and point of reference" for the WCC's work in the years ahead.

These actions underscore that the issues about the identity of the WCC which were raised in Toronto remain alive in the churches - to the extent that they must continue to be a subject of discussion; indeed, says the CUV text: "it is of the essence of the churches' fellowship within the ecumenical movement that they continue to wrestle with these differences in a spirit of mutual understanding, commitment and accountability" .

## The WCC and ecumenism

Stimulated by the CUV study and document, reflection on ecumenism has pursued various avenues over the past decade. For example, a **Special Commission examined Orthodox participation in the WCC**; a change from parliamentary to consensus decision-making procedures was one direct outcome of this four-year effort, that ended in 2002.

Pursuing another avenue of reflection, consultations on "**Ecumenism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**" focused on the "reconfiguration" of the ecumenical movement. A 2004 meeting on this topic suggested ways to strengthen and systematize relationships between ecumenical partners.

The **CUV document** itself continues to provide resources for the ongoing development of ecumenism. For example, the WCC claims to be a "fellowship of churches", but this is sometimes challenged from a spiritual perspective. "Praying together" has become an ecclesiological and spiritual challenge, and the CUV has much to say on this subject.