

A heart-to-heart ecumenical dialogue

The Global Christian Forum

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From April 16-19, 2024, the fourth international Global Christian Forum took place in Accra, the capital of Ghana. Bringing together some 250 people from more than 50 countries, who represented varied church families, global networks and diverse organizations, it was a time for going in-depth, for prayer and for sharing. The Forum is held every six years, each time in a different world region.

Background

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) is one of the very few central places where unity between the Churches on a global scale is experienced and promoted. Founded in 1998 by the former general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Konrad Raiser, the GCF aims to pursue dialogue with Pentecostal Churches and other growing 'free Churches'. Most of these are not affiliated with the World Council of Churches.

The only possible format for establishing dialogue between all these Churches was to aim not on a theological dialogue, but a dialogue 'of the heart'. As the current Secretary General, Casely Essamuah, who is of Ghanaian origin, explained there: the GCF wants to give Christians an opportunity to know and receive the gifts that the Holy Spirit has placed in the various Churches. "It is a space for a deep faith encounter. In this way we learn to discover the richness of Christ".

Half of the participants are always bishops and leaders of 'traditional' Churches, from the Orthodox and Oriental Churches to the Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic Churches. The other half are leaders of various Pentecostal and Free Churches. In addition to these six-yearly meetings, the Forum also promotes continental, regional and national meetings.

At the heart of the meeting

The meeting approach is one of an exchange of personal "faith stories" in small groups of up to ten people. It is a listening to what the Spirit wants to tell us through others' walk with Christ. Bishop Rosemarie Wenner, representative of the Methodist Church at the WCC, explains: "Seeing Christ in others is the goal of this exercise. Let the Holy Spirit guide our words and enable us to listen carefully to the stories of others".

The Ghana meeting took exactly this form. Sharing groups were arranged around large round tables. Having already participated in several meetings of this kind in the Dutch Christian Forum, I again noted the fruitfulness of this approach, which gives rise to a spiritual friendship and fraternal unity that brings great joy among all.

In her sermon at the opening liturgy, Lydia Neshangwe, a young pastor and moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Zimbabwe, expressed her life experience as follows: "I was born in an independent Church. I am grateful to the Pentecostals who gave me a good faith foundation, and to the Catholic Church which educated me in its schools. Then I underwent theological training with the Presbyterians. But my favorite Church is the Methodist Church, which gave me a husband!".

The theme in Ghana was 'That all may be one, that the world may believe'. Each day focused on a particular part of this theme. According to a reflection on chapter 17 of John's Gospel offered by Billy Wilson, president of Pentecostal World Fellowship, this unity is primarily *relational*; then it is fulfilled through *mission*: 'that the world may know and believe'; and finally *spiritual*, like the relationships between the Persons of the Trinity.

Once again, I noticed that this spiritual dimension of relationships for so many is not taken for granted and sometimes not understood, as I also experienced in our group sharing. I immediately thought, "Forget it. If God wants a light to come on, then the time will come." I then emptied myself of all thought and opened myself completely to what others were saying. Then came the time when I shared a concrete experience. And the atmosphere changed. From the head it went to the heart, and I saw this in others, too. There was an opening to this deeper vision of our relationships.

It was like a small drop. So many undoubtedly see the importance of love and relationships, but they see them more as a commandment, a necessary consequence of our relationship with God, which is undoubtedly right. But there is the danger that we miss the power of witness that comes from God's presence in our midst. It is precisely this presence that our unity is called to witness, so that the world may believe. As Jerry Pillay, general secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, said: a world in crisis needs united Christians.

The Program

A gathering of young people was held during the previous three days, who then participated in the four days of the main program as well. Together with the presence of many young volunteers from Ghana, it made for a young and vital church experience.

What was impressive and very shocking was the day trip to one of the many forts along the West African coast that were used for the slave trade. As Western Christians, we were deeply ashamed of this history. There were, for example, Churches that celebrated their liturgy in chapels right above the cellars where slaves were locked up for three months, reduced to conditions worse than animals. The celebration in the Methodist church that followed this visit was a prayer of lament, a plea for forgiveness, and an awareness that this history is still perpetuated through other forms of abuse and dehumanization.

In short, it was an unforgettable, enlightening and fruitful trip. For me it was once again an experience of the richness and breadth of the Church of the future, which is already

proclaimed through such experiences. I am Catholic and I remain Catholic well rooted in my Church. But for a long time this has signified for me: living this ecumenical dimension and experience. As various popes since Paul VI have said: 'To be Catholic is to be ecumenical'. And I wish this for many others!