

## Ecumenical space expanded for whom?

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In this article we are setting out to address the dire need for reorientation within the ecumenical movement. In so doing, we are going to argue for a shift of emphasis that will take the notion of “ecumenical space” seriously. The traditional option for ecumenical agreements so as to achieve a progressively higher level of unity seems to have reached a dead end. The very ideal of visible unity is also under threat.

We are going to do three things. First, after a paragraph on the very notion of space, we will identify the emergence of the concept ecumenical space within the ecumenical movement itself and argue for its relevance in this same movement on a global scale. Second, we will use the ecumenical endeavours in South Africa as a case study and try to find out why there so far seems to be no tendency to make use of such a notion in the present struggle for Christian and church unity. We will only be able to hint at certain crucial factors that have meant that the ecumenical movement in South Africa has been and is losing ground. Third, we will turn to the current discussion within the World Council of Churches (WCC) on the need for a space, be it “ecumenical” or “expanded,” leading us towards the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Busan, South Korea. Drawing from the earlier conceptualization of space in WCC thinking towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we argue that ecumenical space remains a powerful tool in progressive, ecumenical thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Space

Space is a geographical term, but it is also social, political and theological. It is not a bad idea to start from the geographical and physical end, as it will have a bearing on all the others. “[S]pace is directly lived, through its associated images and symbols and hence the space of inhabitants and users . . . It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.”<sup>1</sup> A space will be understood through our “spatial practices – for instance in working, walking or worshipping but also through the buildings and their forms that frame our potential to act.”<sup>2</sup>

Building on this physical and geographical definition of space, one may continue further and say that space could be seen as a product of interrelations, as coexisting heterogeneity, and as

<sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 38f; Henrik Widmark, “Space, Materiality and the Politics of Leaving,” in *For the Sake of the World: Swedish Ecclesiology in Dialogue with William T Cavanaugh*, ed. Jonas Ideström (Eugene: Pickwick [Church of Sweden, Research Series 3], 2009), 49–64, 55.

<sup>2</sup> Widmark, “Space,” 54.

being always under construction.<sup>3</sup> Space is also a key concept for understanding “the politics of leaving” and describes the dire consequences of the Church of Sweden leaving the immigrant community at Rosengård in Malmö as a place of worship. The church building was deconsecrated and liturgical activities moved to the old parish church outside Rosengård.<sup>4</sup> Before proceeding, one should bear in mind that the ecumenical movement is basically about a “politics of leaving” as church divisions have taken shape and people have left a particular space, a physical space, for good. There is this space that needs to be reclaimed, which is also liturgical, sacred, and theological.

### **Ecumenical Space in the WCC**

With these basic comments on space in mind, we will now look at how the concept ecumenical space has emerged within the ecumenical movement. It does not have a long history and has perhaps reluctantly been seen as a necessity, a concept that is “evocative, if inelegant.”<sup>5</sup> Now and again the term has been used to denote the need for celebrating diversity and allowing for inclusivity. Thus one can read what is reported from the Faith and Order meeting held in Louvain in 1971: “The church’s unity must be of such a kind that there is ample space for diversity and for the mutual confrontation of different interests and convictions.”<sup>6</sup> The conciliarity of the church requires this. The involvement of all sectors of the church is paramount, that is, the laity. There must be space for those who are oppressed, exploited or in the margin.<sup>7</sup> Various meetings and processes within the ecumenical movement have emphasized the importance of space; so also in Africa. There are, for example, references to the market place. In the study process called Theology of Life, the Kenyan term *sokoni*, denoting market place, came into good use.<sup>8</sup> Likewise at the WCC assembly in Harare, a recurring item in the programme was the so-called *padare*, also having the meaning of “market place,” where programmes were offered as a literal proof of the churches’ rich diversity.<sup>9</sup> Ecumenical space could also be discussed in a typical Faith and

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<sup>3</sup> “First we recognise space as the product of interrelations, as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. Second, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality, as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist, as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity. Third, that we recognize space as always under construction.” Widmark, “Space,” 54; cf. Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Widmark, “Space,” 54.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Falconer, “Ecumenical Space,” *The Ecumenical Review* 56:1 (January 2004), 85–93, 85. The concept “ecumenical space” is frequently used in *The Ecumenical Review*. A few recent examples not used in this article are: Antoine Arjakovsky, “Porto Alegre’s Redefinition of Ecumenism and the Transformation of Orthodoxy,” *The Ecumenical Review* 58:3–4 (2006), 265–79; Claudia Jahnel, “Vernacular Ecumenism and Transcultural Unity Rethinking Ecumenical Theology after the Cultural Turn,” *The Ecumenical Review* 60:4 (2008), 404–25; Samuel Kobia, “Report of the WCC Central Committee, Geneva, 26 August–2 September 2009,” *The Ecumenical Review* 62:1 (2010), 69–111; and Olav Fykse Tveit, “Report of the General Secretary to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches,” *The Ecumenical Review* 63:2 (2011), 219–34. Also in other texts within the WCC context “ecumenical space” has been of importance. In his homily at the 60th anniversary of the World Council of Churches, Saint Pierre Cathedral, Geneva, 17 February 2008, the Ecumenical Patriarch H.A.H. Bartholomew said: “. . . the time had come, the *Kairos* had to be seized, for the World Council of Churches to bring its member churches together into an ‘ecumenical space,’ where trust could be created and built up. It will be a space where the churches will be able to develop, and test against the facts, their own conceptions . . . while retaining their respective distinctiveness one from another and encountering one another at a deeper level.” WCC website, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/centralcommittee/geneva-2008/reports-and-documents/homily-by-the-ecumenical-patriarch-hah-bartholomew.html> 2012-07-31.

<sup>6</sup> *Faith and Order Louvain 1971: Study Reports and Documents*, Faith and Order Paper no 59, ed. Lukas Vischer (Geneva: WCC, 1971), 226ff; cf. Falconer, “Ecumenical Space,” 86.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 86f.

<sup>9</sup> *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, ed. Diane Kessler (Geneva: WCC, 1999), 16f; see also the General Secretary’s Report, in *Together on the Way*, 91.

Order matter. The differing views on leadership in the church were highlighted in a consultation on episcopate and episcopacy: Would it be possible for those representing a personal (episcopal) office to share space with those who would exercise oversight primarily through a communal or collegial kind of leadership?<sup>10</sup>

One could perhaps say that the further that member churches in the WCC committed themselves to visible unity, the more difficult it became to stay together without reservations. One such development in the last decade of the second millennium was the long and comprehensive discussion on the relationship between the member churches and the world council as council. To some members the WCC had become a movement (even a “church”) of its own, not directly related to the member churches. The time had come to interpret anew what it meant to be a “council of churches.”<sup>11</sup> What had to be expressed was the ecclesiological significance of the WCC. The key formulation was “fellowship of churches”: “The WCC is a ‘fellowship of churches’ whose primary purpose is ‘to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.’”<sup>12</sup> A very intriguing interaction is at play here. On the one hand, the WCC could too easily slip into its own proactivity without the churches and would then basically be guilty of becoming a new church, causing yet another split in the body of Christ. On the other hand, the onus is on the churches to in some very concrete respects live up to being part of this fellowship of churches (i.e., the WCC) at least tentatively, calling one another to unity, be it in eucharistic worship or in witness to the world. Paradoxically, this rediscovery of the WCC’s ecclesial vocation, without which there will be no council at all, also opens up a space: in effect a presupposition for any kind of progress towards visible unity. One therefore has to agree with Alan Falconer that the idea of ecumenical space has emerged “in the attempt to find an adequate language to express this aspiration for inclusive community where authentic self-expression is welcomed and respected, and where diversity is celebrated and difficult and conflictual issues are addressed in an ethos of trust and confidence.”<sup>13</sup>

It is certainly no exaggeration to say that the ecumenical movement through the WCC has grown from strength to strength, from an attitude of comparison between strangers to stressing what these strangers had in common after all: a common call to conversion towards unity and towards transformation. This is largely a 20<sup>th</sup>-century story. There is a sense of hope that does not go away. It may have to do with the fact that as churches, believing in being embodied in or by Christ, in Christ we already are what we ought to be. Such a state of affairs may lead to some sought after relaxation, which in turn will help us, despite shortcomings, to maintain the precious goal of visible unity.

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<sup>10</sup> *Episkope and Episcopacy and the Quest for Visible Unity*, Faith and Order Paper no 183, ed. Peter Bouteneff and Alan Falconer (Geneva: WCC, 1999), 40ff; cf. Falconer, “Ecumenical Space,” 87.

<sup>11</sup> This process culminated in the policy document *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches (CUV)* (Geneva: WCC, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> *CUV*, article 3; Falconer, “Ecumenical Space,” 88.

<sup>13</sup> Falconer, “Ecumenical Space,” 88.

There are many factors, both internal and external, that impede ecumenical progress. Some of the outside factors could be said to be “the growing discrepancy between North and South; general estrangement from global ideas and programmes of unity; turn to smaller, distinctive regional, ethnic, and cultural unities and identities; the reawakening of an often militant national consciousness; the return to the past and its values; the strengthening of fundamentalist trends.”<sup>14</sup> The South African experience of impeding factors certainly also tends to be external, non-doctrinal: “As in many other places, social, personal, cultural and political forces were more prevalent. The churches could not unite because they reflected the social realities present in a highly stratified country. By the same token, they fragmented precisely because these realities often proved stronger than any convictions about the unity which Christians have in Jesus Christ, especially at moments of national crisis.”<sup>15</sup> Internal and doctrinal hindrances certainly still are many, and are dependent upon the perspective of one’s particular church confession. Pope John Paul II, in his *Ut Unum Sint* stated six such factors: scripture-tradition, eucharist and sacramentality, ordination, magisterium, Mary, and the role of papacy. In other more Protestant circles, one would still have to discuss issues around episcopacy, justification, conciliarity.<sup>16</sup>

What should invoke hope is the way the ecumenical movement has evolved and matured. One could talk about three decisive steps here. The first phase was one of comparison. In the earlier Faith and Order meetings, one would compare doctrinal positions or church orders, be it eucharist, ministry, grace etc. “This methodology, evident in both doctrinal and ethical questions, enabled the churches to move from positions of isolation or hostility to acceptance and cooperation with each other insofar as agreement was evident.”<sup>17</sup> However, even though this was a big step away from the previous isolation, the state of affairs was still largely one of monologue. Progress was difficult as “it was possible only to affirm the status quo.”<sup>18</sup>

The Faith and Order world conference in Lund 1952 would change that. Here a different methodology was adopted. The question of consensus was raised. The agreed-upon points should lead to closer cooperation and communion. What has become called the Lund principle states as follows: “Should not our churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?”<sup>19</sup>

This was a big step forward. It was now possible to benefit from one another’s different viewpoints and build a common agenda. A sense of togetherness grew. The one tradition

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<sup>14</sup> *Crisis and Challenge of the Ecumenical Movement: Integrity and Indivisibility* Report of the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg (Geneva: WCC, 1994), 3; Alan Falconer, “Beyond the Limits of the Familiar Landscape,” in *Faith and Order in Moshi: The 1996 Commission Meeting*, Faith and Order Paper No 177 ed. Alan Falconer (Geneva: WCC, 1998), 40–53, 40.

<sup>15</sup> John de Gruchy, “Church Unity and Democratic Transformation,” *The Ecumenical Review* 49:2 ( July 1997); Falconer, “Beyond the Limits,” 47.

<sup>16</sup> Falconer, “Beyond the Limits,” 46f.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> *The Third World Conference of Faith and Order*, ed. Oliver Tomkins (London: SCM, 1953); Falconer, “Beyond the Limits,” 42.

and confession would not be complete without the others. However, the unanswered question would still be: “How do we move beyond the recognition of consensus to living in a consensual manner? This is the contemporary crisis of the ecumenical movement.”<sup>20</sup> According to some, the third step that has to be taken has to do with radical conversion. Falconer prefers conversion as transformation,<sup>21</sup> advocates a kenotic ecclesiology, and takes inspiration from the Faith and Order meeting in Santiago di Compostella in 1993, where the following was stated: “The encounter with the other in the search to establish the koinonia, grounded in God’s gift, calls for a kenosis – self-giving and a self-emptying. Such a kenosis . . . invites us to be vulnerable, yet such is no more than faithfulness to the ministry of vulnerability and death of Jesus as he sought to draw human beings into communion with God and each other.”<sup>22</sup>

According to Desmond Tutu such an ecclesiology should also have grounding in an African context, as it is built on inter-connectedness and an awareness of being imago Dei: “God has created us for interdependence as God has created us in his image – the image of a divine fellowship of the holy and blessed Trinity.”<sup>23</sup>

However, Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the WCC from 1994–2004, more than any other ecumenical leader has argued for ecumenical space as a useful tool. Here we

are going to relate some of his thoughts as they were expressed in his report to the general assembly in Harare. One would understand that it was a delicate moment as the Orthodox family of churches very nearly had withdrawn from participating in Harare. But the expression comes in handy and is perhaps useful also in the sense that it is open to numerous interpretations.

Characteristically, Raiser turns to the CUV process<sup>24</sup> that had been ongoing throughout the 1990s, pointing out the council as an “ecclesiological challenge” to the churches. He adds: “The fellowship is not the result of an act of voluntarism on the part of the churches. It has its centre in the common commitment to Christ. As the churches together turn to God in Christ, they discover their fellowship among each other.”<sup>25</sup> This understanding of the WCC opens up a new fellowship: “The significance of this fellowship lies precisely in its opening the space where reconciliation and mutual accountability can take shape and where churches can learn together to walk on the way of a costly ecumenical commitment.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Falconer, “Beyond the Limits,” 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 45; Beverley Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 148f.

<sup>22</sup> *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper no 166, ed. T Best and G Gassman (Geneva: WCC, 1994), 233ff; Falconer, “Beyond the Limits,” 49. It could be discussed in how far a particular ecclesiology would restrict or enhance the use of ecumenical space; an interesting example is Ola Tjørhom, who at the time of writing was adopting a more Roman Catholic stance, an, if you wish, “thicker” notion of unity. See Ola Tjørhom, “The Goal of Visible Unity. Reaffirming Our Commitment,” *The Ecumenical Review*. 54:1–2 (2002), 162–71.

<sup>23</sup> Quotation from Desmond Tutu in *Archbishop Tutu: Prophetic Witness in South Africa*, ed. Louise Kretschmar and Luke Lungile Pato (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1996), 96; Falconer, “Beyond the Limits,” 50.

<sup>24</sup> See footnote 11.

<sup>25</sup> Konrad Raiser, “General Secretary’s Report,” in *Together on the Way*, 81–102, 89; CUV, 3.5.3.

<sup>26</sup> Raiser, “General Secretary’s Report,” 89.

Secondly, in the CUV process it was stated that “[t]he WCC is a sanctuary in a divided world.”<sup>27</sup> According to Raiser “[a] sanctuary is a place of refuge for the stranger; it offers hospitality to those who have no home.”<sup>28</sup> We will here link the sanctuary idea to women in the church as a space offering freedom. This is a difficult and sensitive subject, but nevertheless necessary. Raiser a bit earlier mentioned the powerful impact of the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women ending at Harare. Indeed many of those involved “made a dramatic plea for the space needed to make of the church truly an inclusive community.”<sup>29</sup> The churches may have different traditions as to the role and place of women, but generally it could safely be stated that women often are not recognized for what they do and their leadership is not always taken seriously. To make the church a sanctuary for women may be risky to some, but at the same time necessary: “The WCC as a fellowship of churches marks the space where such risky encounter can take place, where confidence and trust can be built and community can grow. At present, this conviction is being tested severely by conflicts over moral issues, especially regarding human sexuality, and by the ecclesiological and theological challenges arising from the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women. More than ever before we need the WCC as an ecumenical space which is open and yet embraced by the faithfulness of God and protected by the bond of peace, a space of mutual acceptance and understanding as well as of mutual challenge and correction.”<sup>30</sup>

In Raiser’s report the emphasis on the need to talk about ecumenical space is striking. In his deliberations on such space, he early on comes across reflections made at the Faith and Order conference in 1993, in Santiago di Compostella. Like Falconer, Raiser is here referring to the kind of kenosis ecclesiology that is espoused in Santiago.<sup>31</sup>

At this point we would like to make three comments. First of all, it is evident that the churches within the WCC family have made substantial progress in their commitment to each other. The ecumenical movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century bears witness to that. At the same time, the increased sharing of ideas and behaviour, of theology and life, has made tensions between churches more acute than ever. One should not be alarmed by this but rather welcome the fact that there is a growing tension but, at the same time, new openings.

Secondly, ecumenical space is primarily physical space.<sup>32</sup><sup>32</sup> One could also say that ecumenical space inevitably also is liturgical space. In its physicality, it has been difficult to fill such liturgical space with content in the ecumenical movement. Our vulnerability has been conspicuous. The impressive and spacious chapel at Centre Oecumenique in Geneva, or the

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Lodberg, “Common Understanding the Vision: An Analysis of the Responses to the Process,” *The Ecumenical Review* 50:3 (1998), 268–77, 276.

<sup>28</sup> Raiser, “General Secretary’s Report,” 93.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, see also above Falconer’s dealing with this text, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, 233ff.

<sup>32</sup> This is a vital insight in an era of virtual reality: see “Following Jesus into Virtual Space” WCC <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/following-jesus-into-virtual-space>.

more simple chapel at the Ecumenical Centre at Khotso House in Johannesburg, may be cases in point.

Thirdly, separations, churches splitting up, and proselytism within the Christian family are also about physical space. A split is an act of physical segregation, and “we recognise space as always under construction.”<sup>33</sup> Space can be segregated space, marginalized space etc. But ecumenical space could be a reclaiming of the catholicity of the church.

### **South Africa – Kairos for Ecumenical Space**

We now turn to the South African context and shall discuss why the ecumenical church in South Africa is losing ground. The state of the Council is critical. Among other aspects is the financial situation, which is closely linked to the whole issue of ownership.<sup>34</sup> Another vital part of the problems that South African Council of Churches (SACC) is facing is the resurgence of denominationalism and the mistrust it implies.<sup>35</sup> We suggest that the ecumenical space concept could be useful in reclaiming a role for the ecumenical movement in South Africa. Our focus will be SACC as a natural counterpart to the WCC. Within this context, we argue that the following factors have contributed to the present crisis. First the ecumenical movement in South Africa has been an issue-oriented movement. Second, Faith and Order has been a weak point, although, and this is the third factor, organic church union is an exception thereof. The failure to follow up on the Rustenburg conference in 1990 is a fourth aspect, and a fifth is the resurgence of denominationalism. Sixth, and lastly, the relationship between SACC and the government has hampered ecumenism after 1994.

The history of ecumenism in South Africa has its own characteristics. The first ecumenical organization, the General Mission Conference (GMC), was formed in 1904<sup>36</sup> and was an arena for cooperation between different mission societies. Cuthbertson concludes that the main achievement of the GMC was to “prepare the way for the establishment of the Christian Council of South Africa and eventually the South African Council of Churches.”<sup>37</sup> The Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA) was formed in 1936.<sup>38</sup> Although inspired by the European model one major difference has to be pointed out: there was a clause that prohibited discussion of matters concerning doctrine. Therefore, “the ecumenical movement in South Africa was something rather different from that which was taking Europe by storm.”<sup>39</sup> Just like the GMC, the CCSA had the propagation of the gospel in focus.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Widmark, “Space,” 52; Massey, *For Space*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> The present General Secretary of the SACC, Rev Mautji Pataki, describes the situation and talks about a “need to place the ownership of the Council firmly in the hands of its membership . . . Those who have partnered with the SACC for over many years now use this ownership concept almost as a prerequisite for their continued support and partnership. They call upon the member churches, as we do, to settle and bring up to date their membership fee and participate at governance level” (Report to the National Executive Committee, 24 October 2011, 3).

<sup>35</sup> “Since the ecumenical landscape has changed, there [have] been a lot of churches, some emerging, with an expressed desire to become members of the SACC. Although not all are credible, it is worth it to listen to their story and discern their truthfulness. In a long run the SACC must and can grow although care and sensitivity have to be strictly exercised.” (Ibid., 5).

<sup>36</sup> James R. Cochrane, “Christianity during a Period of ‘National Consolidation,’” in *A History of Christianity in South Africa*, ed. J. W. (Hoffie) Hofmeyr and Gerald J. Pillay (Pretoria: HAUM Tertiary, 1994), 231.

<sup>37</sup> Greg C. Cuthbertson, “Christianity, Imperialism and Colonial Warfare,” in *A History of Christianity in South Africa*, 186.

<sup>38</sup> E. Strassberger, *Ecumenism in South Africa, 1936–1960* (Johannesburg: SACC, 1974), 139.

<sup>39</sup> Cochrane, “Christianity,” 232.

The CCSA was an issue-oriented organization, especially after the early 1940s, when the Dutch Reformed churches (DRC) decided to leave the Council.<sup>41</sup> Strassberger describes the Council in this respect as somewhat hesitant: “Involuntarily the Council became involved in situations where much of its energy and time was expended in protesting against discriminatory legislation.”<sup>42</sup> This is even truer about the Council when it changed constitution in 1967/1968 and became the SACC. The focus was of course the struggle against apartheid<sup>43</sup> both at the Cottesloe Consultation, which was an initiative from the WCC, and when *A Message to the People of South Africa* was written by the CCSA and the Christian Institute (CI) in 1968. Even in post-apartheid South Africa, the Council has continued to work with different issues. A difference is that there is no longer a focus on one major issue. The Council has also sought a new focus, a new Kairos.<sup>44</sup>

A second factor leading to the weakened role of the ecumenical church in South Africa is the SACC’s orientation towards “Life and Work” rather than “Faith and Order.” This is of course a simplification. De Gruchy argues that although Life and Work “has been of primary importance to the ecumenical church in South Africa during the long years of the struggle against apartheid,” there have been those in South Africa who have been deeply involved in Faith and Order, for example, those in the Church Unity commission.<sup>45</sup> We will come back to the latter. The clause prohibiting discussions about doctrinal matters during the CCSA era here seems to be the main problem. According to Thomas, the cause of the ineffectiveness of the Council was “that the CCSA was set up to promote missionary cooperation rather than ecumenism as such and indeed, its constitution precluded it from being used as a platform for discussions between churches relating to faith and order.”<sup>46</sup> This is also embedded in the constitution of the SACC. The preamble says that the “The Council is not committed to any one theological understanding of the Church, and membership of the Council does not imply acceptance of any specific doctrine of the Church.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the CCSA did not have any significant influence on the churches: “While doing much good work . . . the transformation of the world which so deeply shaped these same men and women remained at best an addendum to the task of the churches” ( James R. Cochrane, *Servants of Power: The Role of English-speaking Churches in South Africa: 1903–1930: Toward a Critical Theology via an Historical Analysis of the Anglican and Methodist Churches* ( Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 159–60.

<sup>41</sup> Anders Göranson, *The Prophetic Voice of the South African Council of Churches after 1990 – Searching for a Renewed Kairos* (Cape Town: Salty Print, 2011), 145–46.

<sup>42</sup> Strassberger, 173. We can compare this situation with the idea from Uppsala 1968 that the agenda of the church is set by the world. In South Africa, during the apartheid era, this has been more than obvious.

<sup>43</sup> From the 1940s the CCSA organized its work around the apartheid issue, although, according to Thomas, with an assimilationist agenda. (David G. Thomas, “The Christian Council of South Africa as a Platform for Assimilationist Racial Ideology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 67 (1989), 36). The SACC on the other hand also worked with other issues, like the discussions about conscientious objection and capital punishment.

<sup>44</sup> See also Göranson, *Prophetic Voice*, 492–93.

<sup>45</sup> John W. de Gruchy, “Becoming the Ecumenical Church,” in *Being the Church in South Africa Today*, ed. Barney N. Pityana and Charles Villa-Vicencio ( Johannesburg: SACC, 1995), 13.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, “Christian Council.” In the textual material from the National Conferences of the SACC between 1969 and 2004, not much is said about homosexuality. One exception is when the president of the SACC, Dr Khoza Mgojo, in his address of 1994, says that “the Bible is unequivocally clear from Genesis to Revelation that homosexuality is not an acceptable sexual lifestyle or alternate in God’s eyes” (Presidential Address at the National Conference of the SACC, 1994, 12). From other sources one gets the opposite impression, that the SACC has been seen as more liberal. (See Göranson, *Prophetic Voice*, 20). The question is whether the issue of human sexuality is so sensitive that it has not been discussed thoroughly in the ecumenical movement in South Africa.

<sup>47</sup> See the preamble of the constitution of the SACC website: <http://www.sacc.org.za/ARCHIVED%20SACCNEWS/about/constitution.html>.



An illustration of the doctrinal problem can be found in the relation between the SACC and the DRC. The DRC became an observer member in 1995.<sup>48</sup> It had already applied in 1991 but the application was at that time denied, partly because of the unwillingness of the DRC to unite with its sister churches.<sup>49</sup> It is not clear whether the issue of uniting with the other reformed churches, within the DRC family, should be seen as a Faith and Order matter or part of a Life and Work discussion. Maybe the question received its answer when the DRC in 2004 became a member of the SACC, even though no church unity within the DRC family was yet established.<sup>50</sup> It was sufficient that the DRC had denounced Apartheid.

By focusing on organic church union, the ecumenical movement in South Africa still had a Faith and Order perspective. This has especially been the case among the English speaking churches, although there were even discussions about union between the Anglicans and the DRC in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>51</sup> In the 1980s and in the beginning of the 1990s, there were talks between six major English-speaking denominations,<sup>52</sup> but a church union has not yet been achieved. The Lutheran family is still divided along ethnic or racial lines, and the cooperation at the Lutheran Theological Institute (LTI) in Pietermaritzburg is feeble.<sup>53</sup> Seen through the texts of the national conferences of the SACC, there are some contradicting tendencies in this strife. The focus on church union is obvious. The examples sometimes show how the search for organic church union takes place within certain denominational traditions, and the objective is to do away with ethnic divisions within those church families.

Another tendency, though, which would rather speak in favour of the ecumenical space concept, is what the president of the SACC in 1988, Bishop Manas Buthelezi, calls “people’s theology”: “The tents pitched for funeral night vigils are the new cathedrals and sanctuaries of popular ecumenism. There you find Catholics, Lutherans, Zionists, and Methodists etc. doing their holy thing peacefully together, not worried by any theological scruples.”<sup>54</sup> This is in line with what the Danish ecumenist Anna Maria Aagaard introduced in a paper titled “Enlarge the Place of Your Tent; Let the Curtains of Your Habitations Be Stretched Out: On Church and Ecumenics Today.” She says that “theology – including ecumenical theology – has namely nothing to speak about (it has no content), if it does not reflect on shared practice.”<sup>55</sup> The tent as a metaphor could serve as a South

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<sup>48</sup> “And the Dutch Reformed Church was inducted as Observer Member[s] of the South African Council of Churches” (National Conference of the SACC 1995, Minutes 95/43, Reception of new members of SACC).

<sup>49</sup> “1. To postpone the application of the DRC for observer status until the next National Conference to take a final decision. 2. In the meantime we call upon the DRC 2.1 To issue a clear statement that they are withdrawing their previous accusations against the SACC; 2.2 to provide a clear motivation of their reasons for applying to become an observer of the SACC now, 2.3 to enter into discussion with its sister churches in order to normalise relationships between them; 2.4 to declare their willingness to criticise this and any future government in terms of the Gospel” (National Conference of the SACC 1991, Resolution A 2 (i)).

<sup>50</sup> National Conference of the SACC 2004, Minutes 04.09.01.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas 1989, 16.

<sup>52</sup> The Anglican, Evangelical Presbyterian, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed Presbyterian and United Congregational churches were involved in these talks in the Church Unity Commission (CUC) (see Frank Chikane in General Secretary’s Report to the National Conference of the SACC 1991, 19).

<sup>53</sup> This is an example of how challenging the “ecumenical space” concept is when different churches try to cooperate in a physical space. In the South African context, given the history of separation, this is even more provocative.

<sup>54</sup> President’s Address at the National Conference of the SACC 1988, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Aagaard, Anna Maria. “Enlarge the Place of Your Tent: Let the Curtains of Your Habitations be Stretched Out: On Church and Ecumenics Today,” (Unpublished paper delivered at Stiftmötet in Kalmar, 4 June (2007), 3.

African contribution to this discussion (as the sokoni and padare concepts have done, mentioned above, and madang at Busan).<sup>56</sup> The tent relates to both the Old Testament tradition and contemporary revival traditions. Having said this, we still have to ask, in a South African context, how open these tents are to people from the different social strata in South Africa, and likewise how eager South Africans in general are to join the fellowship in those tents. But one can at least conclude that the night vigils are spaces where those who are oppressed, exploited, or in the margin are being included.<sup>57</sup>

This brings us to the fourth factor contributing to the diminishing role of the ecumenical church in South Africa today: that is, the failure to follow up on the 1990 Rustenburg conference. At the conference, representatives of more than 90 percent of the Christian community in South Africa came together.<sup>58</sup> This might be an overestimation, but with the Rustenburg Conference the ecumenical church in South Africa had an opportunity to start afresh. The general secretary of the SACC, Frank Chikane, described how “some even argue that this type of gathering of churches has not happened anywhere in contemporary history.”<sup>59</sup> Be this as it may, the conference, for a short period of time, opened up the ecumenical space and gave the Christian community in South Africa a possibility of forming a new way of living together. What happened thereafter seems to be a closing of this opportunity. Chikane hoped that after Rustenburg more “churches could gravitate towards the SACC.”<sup>60</sup> But in the same breath he feared that the Rustenburg Conference might lead to an attempt “to form an alternative ecumenical forum in competition with the SACC.” One has to ask what could have happened if the SACC had kept a door open. This could be seen as a fateful historic moment and a lost opportunity. It is therefore natural that around 1994, when the Government of National Unity (GNU) was formed, a different ecumenical situation arose. De Gruchy and De Gruchy describe the situation as an “emergence of denominational myopia and internal ecclesial concerns.”<sup>61</sup> It is understandable that many denominations in South Africa need to look after their own interests after many years of struggle against apartheid. By doing that, though, an indispensable part of being church was at risk.

When the SACC was evaluated by the Christian Organizations Research and Advisory Trust for Africa (CORAT Africa) in 2009, the need for a Members Pastoral Forum was pointed out, where the spiritual heads of the members would meet regularly.<sup>62</sup> This would at least be a step in the right direction. What the South African church needs are local ecumenical spaces, where the liturgical aspect is crucial.

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<sup>56</sup> We appreciate that the Assembly Planning Committee recognizes this: “Since the 3rd WCC Assembly (New Delhi 1961) assemblies have worshiped under a tent, symbolising that we are a pilgrim people on a journey together towards visible unity. The APC recommends that this powerful image should be maintained for the Busan Assembly prayer life” (Assembly Planning Committee, 27 September to 1 October 2011, Interim Report from Busan, 7).

<sup>57</sup> See above, text at note 7.

<sup>58</sup> General Secretary’s Report to the National Conference of the SACC 1991, 22.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>61</sup> John de Gruchy and Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 25th Anniversary Edition (London: SCM Press, 2004), 223.

<sup>62</sup> “Be Ye the Watchdog of the People,” Evaluation Report Facilitated by CORAT Africa, May 2009, 69.

The fifth and last factor negatively influencing the role of the ecumenical church in South Africa is the fact that ecumenical initiatives sometimes have been taken by the government. State President F. W. de Klerk, in his Christmas address 1989, took the first initiative to the Rustenburg conference.<sup>63</sup> This was not acceptable to most black Christians, therefore a committee was formed, with Frank Chikane and Albert Louw as convenors. But even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the government takes such initiatives. In 2010 the president of SACC, Tinyiko Maluleke, noted that the ANC government had formed different bodies for cooperation with the religious community and admitted that “it is ominous for a political party to take upon itself to organize and reconfigure the religious landscape.”<sup>64</sup> We need to ask: Are the churches more concerned about upholding unity with the government than within the Christian community? In this context we can therefore ask if the prophetic voice of the ecumenical church in South Africa, represented by the SACC, is still heard.<sup>65</sup> Maluleke argues that the SACC always had a voice “but we have often failed to find and use it.”<sup>66</sup> The prophetic ministry could be seen as a kind of ecumenical space, just as the SACC general secretary in 2004, Molefe Tsele, delivered quite a strong critique of the African governments – although he described the South African situation as distinct – when he stated: “[it] appears that the democratic space we have opened has sufficiently evolved to allow clarity on church – state relationship. Those in civil society also make the same claim, that African governments are not receptive of opening and sharing the democratic space with non-government organs.”<sup>67</sup> If this is the case, the ecumenical space in Africa will be restricted to a purely apolitical one, where some denominations will feel comfortable while others do not. This is also the core problem of SACC. The issue orientation has caused many denominations to withdraw from or even refrain from joining the Council. If the Council had paid more attention to the doctrinal side of ecumenism one can assume that the apartheid issue would have been more thoroughly worked through. One example of this is the aftermath of Rustenburg. A question one can ask is whether absolution was given too quickly when some of the churches confessed apartheid as sin.

### **The WCC Assembly Coming Close: Why We Cannot Do without Ecumenical Space**

To bring in the ecumenical space concept may to some have been a wasted effort. Discussions on the reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement were in 2004 converted to ecumenism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Are these concepts already part of ecumenical history? We are not so sure. Both may still have a role to play. In this section we will try to demonstrate this and show that the need for an ecumenical space concept is there. Reconfiguration talks over the last few years undergird this conviction. We will here argue that the present planning of the Busan assembly already is inspired by these two processes. A more narrow Protestant route has wisely been avoided, and what is now planned for the assembly looks pretty much

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<sup>63</sup> Louw Alberts and Frank Chikane, “Introduction,” in *The Road to Rustenburg: The Church Looking Forward to a New South Africa*, ed. Louw Alberts and Frank Chikane (Cape Town: Struik Christian Books, 1991), 14.

<sup>64</sup> Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, *Of Power Perfected in Weakness: Challenges Facing the Ecumenical Movement and the People of South Africa Today*, Presidential Address at the SACC Central Committee Meeting, 9 March 2010. SACC website, <http://www.sacc.org.za/ARCHIVED%20SACCNEWS/docs/CCMAAdPrez.pdf>.

<sup>65</sup> For further discussion of the prophetic voice of the SACC after 1990, see Göranzon, *Prophetic Voice*.

<sup>66</sup> See Maluleke, *Of Power*.

<sup>67</sup> General Secretary’s Report to the National Conference of the SACC 2004, 19.

like a reconfigured WCC. We will thus have a brief look at what has been discussed regarding these matters since Porto Alegre 2006. We will also look at the open space that the Korean term *madang* suggests, briefly revisit Africa, recall comments regarding ecumenical and expanded space, and finally make a summary.

Since Porto Alegre there has been a tendency to talk about an expanded space rather than an ecumenical space per se; certainly any term in the ecumenical vocabulary would sooner or later lend itself to such usage. Such is the nature of *oikoumene*. Here we will, however, argue that ecumenical space is at its most useful when applied at the core of the matter, when it comes to revitalize longstanding relationships. If the Newer Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (NPCs) come in with full force, such a space is inevitable, but just as much we need such a space to be able to move forward in a renewed way in established relationships.

There have been many talks about how to minimize the number of meetings in the wider ecumenical world. General Secretary Samuel Kobia said the following at Porto Alegre: “We could envisage together, instead of the many different global assemblies and general conferences organized by the various world communions and other bodies, just one celebration of the search for unity and common witness of Christian churches.”<sup>68</sup> What he envisages is great, but how do we do it? We are not yet even used to our very different ways of celebration, even if Africa may show a way forward here. However, in the ensuing discussion, and already in Kobia’s own speech, two confessional world bodies, LWF and WARC,<sup>69</sup> emerged as serious partners in such endeavours. We now know that nothing will come of this hoped for cooperation, at least in the next few years. With the very short perspective we have, one could still venture to say: this is just as well. “Or as Reinhard Frieling put it slightly more polemically, a Reformation ‘Blockbuilding’ between the WCC, LWF and WARC might lead to more problems than benefits.”<sup>70</sup> First, one should say that this discussion has been launched with the best of intentions, and yet one also has to admit, with the weight of only a few years of history, that what is now being planned is far more conducive to what the WCC is all about, in service of the wider *oikoumene*.

We are impressed by the planning for Busan so far. It proves the reconfiguration debate has not been in vain. As is so clearly stated in one of the reports preparing for Busan: “The ecumenical movement in the 21st century will be a special space: where increasing numbers of Christians are involved in the work of Christian unity, and the fellowship among the churches is strengthened; where an open and ecumenically minded culture is fostered in the everyday lives of people in their own contexts, and where ecumenical formation is a central focus at all levels of church life, from the local to the global.”<sup>71</sup> This text from the second

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<sup>68</sup> Stephen Brown, “Towards a Common Global Ecumenical Assembly?” in *The Ecumenical Review* 58:3–4 (July/October 2006), 223.

<sup>69</sup> The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) was formed through the merger of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) in June 2010.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, “Towards a Common,” 251.

<sup>71</sup> Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century, *Final Report* (Geneva: WCC, 2012), 2f; *Ecumenism in the 21st Century: Report of the Consultation Convened by the WCC* (Geneva: WCC, 2005), 5f.

meeting on reconfiguration held at Chavannes de Bogis in 2004 is seen as a value statement undergirding continued work.

The Assembly Discernment Committee has spent ample time on the idea of expanded space: “there is an expectation and hope that the next assembly will be something new – that it will draw the other ecumenical agencies and new players into its life; that it will bring about new growth and integration into the ecumenical movement – it is this aspiration that talk of an ‘expanded space’ at the next assembly is intended to serve.”<sup>72</sup>

Again the Christian World Communions were discussed as they are natural partners of the WCC, but it was also quickly realised that collaboration would have to differ depending on the nature of the various world families (be it Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, or LWF and WARC, whose structures are close to those of the WCC). That expanded space would also mean new opportunities. “The special perspectives of the Roman Catholic Church and of the Pentecostal and new church movements could be ‘embraced’ and drawn into the circle of fellowship and consensus building which is the aspiration of all assemblies.”<sup>73</sup> This situation would permit a wider agenda than before.

However, the Assembly Planning Committee has to come up with some tangible proof that what has been said and reflected upon has some substance. A thorough reading of the latest report available gives the impression that they have taken all these comments into account. All the various ecumenical partners have been kept in mind. The preparatory task is, among other things, “to provide a space where representatives of member churches together with ecumenical partners can move forward towards a shared vision for the ecumenical movement at the beginning of the 21st century.”<sup>74</sup> There is also care taken to ensure that the various parts of the assembly are not disconnected or fragmented, while at the same time fulfilling the mandate to see to its basic “constitutional functions related to governance, elections and committee work.”<sup>75</sup>

In this, as in other documents preparing for the next assembly, mention is of course made of the emergence of the Global Christian Forum, a body facilitated by the WCC, still completely on its own. Its development since Harare 1998 could be material for an article of its own, indeed. Let us here rather confirm, first, that notice must be taken of developments regarding this forum at all times, and, second, that, if anything, Global Christian Forum already is an attractive ecumenical space with the widest possible embrace. However, our deliberations on ecumenical space are derived from the actual and concrete business of the WCC.

One may perhaps say that the concept of ecumenical space has undergone a development to what in the post Porto Alegre situation is expanded space. Our contention is however, and

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<sup>72</sup> Report of the Assembly Discernment Committee, WCC Central Committee, August–September 2009 (Geneva: WCC), 14.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>74</sup> Assembly Planning Committee, Interim Report from Busan, September-October 2011 (Geneva: WCC), 2.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

we will come back to this, that expanded space should be seen as an articulation of what very much remains ecumenical space.

The traditional Korean space, madang, will be integrated in the assembly as such. “It is a traditional Korean courtyard connecting different parts of a house; a space for discussion, deliberation, celebration and fellowship. The Korean churches proposed madang as a concept to help root the assembly in the host context and also give shape and meaning to the assembly.”<sup>76</sup> Perhaps as a step beyond what was the case in previous assemblies there is now an ambition “to prepare the entire assembly as a shared space for encounter, to link plenary presentations, discussion spaces, workshops, committees, seminars, etc, in more intentional ways.”<sup>77</sup>

Let us briefly return to Africa, where the funeral tents have been stretched into unforeseen ecumenical spaces. Barney Pityana says that Africa is the footprint of God. His point is that humans in Africa have walked for so many centuries with God that human footprints have become those of God. There is also an incarnational side to this: “Africans journeyed with God and God tabernacled in their midst. God was incarnate.” Africans also tend to believe that there is a moral universe. “There must be some common, shared and abiding values that bind us together for all time.” As the greatest gift that Africa can bestow on us would be “a world that is more human, more caring and more loving,” the fossilized footprints tell the full story. “It says to me that God is great not because God is powerful but because God has chosen to dwell among us ordinary sinful people.”<sup>78</sup>

One may be forgiven for believing that the Moderator’s (Aram I) report to the WCC in Harare 1998 was given in this inclusive African spirit. Among other things, he deals with the place of the Orthodox churches in the WCC. We will use his example, not to point out a particular Orthodox problem at all, but rather as something that has validity in all ecumenical relations. All examples here given are in fact telling a story about the WCC in general.

Aram I states first that the Orthodox are critical not about the council’s *raison d’être* but rather about “the relevance of its agenda, language, methodology and procedures.”<sup>79</sup> The fact that many Orthodox representatives are dissatisfied does not mean we are sitting with an Orthodox problem but rather with an ecumenical problem. He continues: “[O]ur fellowship in the WCC can no longer be based on a majority-minority relationship . . . I also believe that we cannot impose our convictions and agendas on each other. We cannot express uneasiness against each other either, when we want to speak out on what we consider to be vital issues. The Council should provide an open space [our emphasis] in which churches engage themselves in creative interaction based on mutual respect, trust and responsibility.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>78</sup> Barney Pityana, “The Footprint of God,” in *Together on the Way*, 207–13.

<sup>79</sup> Aram I, “The Work by the WCC: Past, Present and Future: Moderator’s Report,” in *ibid.*, 42–80, 70.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 70f.

With the CUV perspective, the churches are what the Council is. With genuine ecumenical eloquence, Aram I pinpoints how tied up we are, bound to do things together. “The ecumenical movement, which is at a crossroads in a world in rapid transformation, may disintegrate if the churches fail to firmly recommit themselves to the ecumenical goals and vision. The churches can no longer afford to take refuge in their own confessions and to live in self-isolation. They must co-exist; otherwise they cannot meaningfully exist. They must interact; otherwise they cannot properly act. They must share their experiences and resources; otherwise they cannot grow . . . Growing together is, indeed, a costly process. It calls for conversion, renewal and transformation.”<sup>81</sup>

Perhaps without realizing it, Aram I here gives a mini-seminar in how to get along in the ecumenical space; and it is more than evident that we are talking about core business. Only if there is a process of dealing with the present fellowship of churches and an open space for that will it be possible and meaningful to embark on an expanded space pilgrimage in the coming assembly. It could prepare us for the day when the other newer churches (be they Pentecostal, Charismatic or African Instituted, or equivalent) come storming in, at Busan or at a later stage.

In the first part of this article we presented some of Raiser’s reasoning around ecumenical space. He recalls the CUV process; here he sees the common commitment to Christ as the key to opening the space of encounter; he is convinced that the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women also has created a crucial space; finally, inspired by the Santiago di Compostella conference, he suggests that to realise koinonia, we need a kenotic theology and ecclesiology, and space where this can be articulated.<sup>82</sup>

Certainly our conviction is that ecumenical space and expanded space are closely linked. The latter is a function of the former. A look at the nature of the WCC will clarify this. It is “a ‘privileged instrument’ of the ecumenical movement, although not necessarily its centre.”<sup>83</sup> As such an instrument, the WCC as an ecumenical space is indeed also entrusted with the wider, expanded space: “[T]he ecumenical movement is polycentric and, indeed, an open ecumenical space. The WCC is not at the centre and does not own the space as such. However, because the WCC is not just an organization, but first and foremost a fellowship of member churches that have also created most of the other ecumenical instruments in their quest for unity and common witness to the world, the WCC was entrusted with the task to facilitate a common table.”<sup>84</sup>

However, time has come to qualify what ecumenical space is. One sometimes gets the feeling that anything goes and at worst that it is an idea that is brought forward when it is convenient

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>82</sup> See above, text at footnote 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Report of the Assembly Discernment Committee* (Geneva: WCC, 2009), 2.

<sup>84</sup> *Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21st Century: Final Report* (Geneva: WCC, 2012), 4.

for one's own agenda or pet projects. But we have already provided what one could call a core definition articulated by Raiser: Commitment to Christ will open such a space.

In addition one should also say that the mission to serve the whole oikoumene makes it necessary to work with or provide auxiliary spaces, some of which would have "being human" or "being part of this world" as criterion.

The WCC has in fact reached consensus on very few points. One such, which became evident in the CUV process, is the search for visible unity, a conviction which must not be taken for granted and which must therefore be guarded at all costs. In striving for visible unity, it goes without saying that ecumenical space cannot just be an idea or a metaphor for something less tangible; above all it is a place where matter and spirit dwell together. The ecumenical space concept could be instrumental in the search for visible unity. It could also do away with two pitfalls: unity understood as uniformity, and, on the other hand, unity as allowing for laissez faire diversity. Nevertheless, ecumenical space offers room for difference as well as sameness. One could also wish that a properly utilized ecumenical space would be the end of the entrenched ecumenical reductionism that willingly has tried to avoid any element that might be deemed unacceptable to some. Liturgy belongs in this ecumenical space. We foresee a renewal confessional and beyond, with an abundance of unabridged, relevant, expressive, representative liturgies. Indeed, an ecumenical space under the auspices of the WCC would have the potential of becoming a place where the God of life could lead us to justice and peace.