

Opening Remarks

**Presentation by
Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia
General Secretary, World Council of Churches**

**Consultation on Ecumenism in the 21st Century
Chavannes-de-Bogis, Switzerland
30 November 2004**

Karibu! Bienvenue! Welcome to this Consultation on Ecumenism in the 21st century. This is an important meeting which brings together a wide range of representatives of the ecumenical movement to discuss an issue of vital concern to us all.

I would like to begin by briefly reviewing the origins of these discussions, with an emphasis on last year's meeting on Reconfiguration in Antelias. I will then mention some of the changes in the global context which give an urgency to these discussions and then suggest some of the challenges for this meeting.

The Road to Antelias

Discussions about a possible new configuration of the ecumenical movement have taken place for the past seven years in meetings of various groupings of ecumenical partners, such as the Regional Ecumenical Organizations (REOs), National Councils of Churches (NCCs), Christian World Communions (CWCs), ecumenical agencies/specialized ministries, and partners such as the Roman Catholic Church and Evangelical and Pentecostal communities. At its meetings in 2002 and 2003, the WCC Central Committee encouraged continuing discussions and suggested a timeframe.

In November 2003, a consultation on re-configuration of the ecumenical movement was organized by the World Council of Churches. A diverse group of 36 people participated in the consultation in their individual capacities. The meeting, held in Antelias, hosted by our Moderator Catholicos Aram I, was preceded by a consultation of young people on the same issue. The report of that meeting, which many of you have read (and which is available for those who have not received it), underscored the importance of the issue of reconfiguration, identified a number of questions which need to be considered, and asked WCC to convene a meeting of a representative group of ecumenical actors to carry the process forward. This is what we have done in convening this meeting.

The statement from Antelias notes that the term "reconfiguration" is interpreted in different ways. I mention at least three ways. One understanding refers to "broadening the ecumenical movement" by reaching out to churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, and Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and seeking ways of greater engagement with them. The Global Christian Forum, which was created after the 1998 Harare Assembly is an on-going process of gathering representatives from all the main Christian traditions. At the national level, Roman Catholic and Evangelical churches have joined a number of national and regional councils of churches. A second understanding of reconfiguration refers to the process of "deepening the fellowship" between churches. This emphasis on relationships between churches is central to the ecumenical

movement, but is also taking place through bilateral dialogues between churches. A third understanding addresses the question of how relationships can be strengthened between existing ecumenical actors to ensure greater coherence and effectiveness in our work. This refers to questions about the relationships between our structures and the extent to which our actions complement one another's. The Antelias consultation recommended that further discussions are particularly needed on this third dimension as there are already processes underway to address the first two dimensions.

Clearly these three understandings of reconfiguration are related. We are suggesting here that we focus on this third dimension – on strengthening relationships and improved means of cooperation within the ecumenical family – but within the context of efforts to both broaden and deepen the fellowship. Clearly too, it is impossible to talk about any of these three dimensions without considering the values and visions which lie at the core of the ecumenical movement. For this reason, we are now calling this process “the future of ecumenism in the 21st century.” We must begin by looking at our common vision for ecumenical work in this century.

What is at stake

Ecumenical organizations and structures have proliferated in the past decade. I think for example, of the creation of ACT, the establishment of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, and Ecumenical News International at the global level. I think on the regional level of the emergence of sub-regional fellowships in Africa and on the national level of the movement to create Christian Churches Together in the USA. And of course, there are many examples of other new ecumenical bodies. This proliferation puts a burden on churches which are the main constituency of all of these new institutions. For example, the Church of Kiribati in the Pacific, which has 40,000 members, is a member of 10 ecumenical/confessional bodies, pays subscription fees to 8 of these bodies and is asked to send representatives to meetings of all 10 organizations.

Moreover, much of the work of the ecumenical movement, whether carried out by WCC or the World Alliance of YMCAs or the regional ecumenical organizations is financed by the same funding partners, giving rise to questions about how much longer this can be sustained.

We believe, as do many of you, that these questions are urgent. If ecumenical organizations are going to be relevant and effective, we need to address issues of proliferation, duplication and overlap of work, and our relationships with each other.

In preparation for this consultation and in following up one of the recommendations from Antelias, a mapping study was carried out by a consultant, Jill Hawkey. You have received the report of this study and will hear more from Jill tomorrow about the results of the mapping study. I also wrote to all WCC member churches, inviting their reflections on the issue of ecumenism in the 21st century; you have received copies of the reflections which we received. Finally, we also asked a number of individuals from different regions and different parts of the ecumenical family to reflect on two questions: what are your visions for the ecumenical movement in the 21st century and what structures are needed to carry those visions forward. You have received a compilation of the reflections received. These are all intended as inputs into the discussion.

A word about context

In the past year, I have traveled extensively, talking with churches in almost all regions (and I will visit the remaining two regions, the Caribbean and the Middle East, early in 2005.) Let me share with you some of the insights I have learned through these travels.

1. People in all regions are insecure, fearful, and anxious. Today's world is a frightening and unsettled one. It is a broken and fractured world. People are increasingly afraid of the United States, the sole superpower today. On their part majority of the US citizens are afraid of the rest of the world; they are afraid of terrorism and think the rest of the world hates them. Rather than respecting US leadership in the world, people are afraid of US arrogance and domination. Many people shudder at the thought of a nuclear race and the possibility of access to nuclear weapons by non-state actors. At the same time, generalized violence is a source of growing concern.
2. Questions of identity are becoming more important in a globalizing world. As people seek to understand their identity, they are increasingly seeing their identity in terms of religion. This leads to the question of how faiths relate to one another. A dialogue of identities is necessary and inter-faith dialogue, at the grassroots level, is sorely needed.
3. Christianity is shifting its center of gravity from the North to the South and by the middle of this century, the global South and particularly Africa, will be the center of Christianity. But there are questions about what kind of Christianity this will be. The "informal sector" of Christianity is becoming more important as evidenced by the proliferation of mega-churches and non-denominational congregations. Moreover, in Northern countries, there seems to be an increased interest in spirituality which is often sought outside of religious structures.

4. A large proportion of the global economy is shifting to the South. China and India together have more than one third of the world's population and the world cannot ignore this huge market. With Japan as the second largest economy in the world and other emerging economies in that region, over half of the global market is in Asia. Added to their economic power is the reality that China and India are both nuclear powers. The political and military implications of these shifts toward the South are also important and raise many questions. Is the North prepared to live as equals with the South? Will there be a 21st century equivalent of the cold war?
5. The mobility of human beings is assuming new dimensions. While more people are moving freely for business or pleasure, increasingly people are forced to move because of conflicts and poverty. This group of people faces increasing restrictions by governments through tighter border controls and visa requirements. They also face hostility, xenophobia, and racism. Out of desperation, many migrants are turning to traffickers. These new migration trends lead us to put a priority on protecting the most vulnerable in society.
6. The confrontation between the West and the Arab world is another global trend which is expressed in different ways, including the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq. What we are seeing in Israel-Palestine is the sustained humiliation of a people which cannot continue. We are all also aware that military solutions to Iraq are not the answer.
7. There are also signs of hope. Many people in many regions are increasingly embracing the view that "another world is possible" (A new heaven and a new earth!). And not just a world where to be is to consume, but one undergirded by a deep sense of spiritual discernment. A world where life in dignity in participatory and sustainable communities is the guiding vision. And what is more, the traditionally marginalized and excluded are actively struggling to transform our communities and institutions to make such a world indeed possible. In all the regions a spirituality of resistance and hope is growing among many Christians and in some churches.

Dr Oscar Corvalán will talk to us later this morning about changes in the "demographics" of Christianity and the growth of Pentecostalism and the rise of the South. The decrease in membership of mainline Protestant churches, which have been the pillars of the ecumenical movement is a source of concern, as is evidence of increasing "denominationalism."

I believe that these changes compel us to look creatively at how to strengthen the ways we work and I hope that this Consultation will make concrete suggestions which will move us forward.

The questions

Let me spell out some of the questions and issues which need to be addressed.

1. What is the vision of the ecumenical movement? Can the vision that has guided the ecumenical movement through its history be re-affirmed, or do we need to re-articulate it in the new context? What are the marks of a common understanding of the ecumenical movement for the 21st century? Which are the fundamental core values that should shape the common witness of the churches through the ecumenical movement?
2. Do we share a similar commitment to being accountable to one another? How can we balance “broadening the fellowship” – which implies bringing together a broader range of actors into a “forum” type model – with the need for mutual accountability to each other? How do we balance the need to be prophetic – to take common stands on difficult issues – with our desire to broaden the fellowship by including churches from different traditions and backgrounds?
3. I want to stress that the question of the future of ecumenism in the 21st century is a much broader issue than how WCC should be re-organized. This is not a consultation about re-structuring WCC. That being said, I believe that in order for the ecumenical movement to better respond to future challenges, we must all be willing to change. I believe that WCC is willing to change, but I want to put the question to all of you as well. To what extent are you willing to change the way you work for the good of the greater ecumenical movement?
4. Who sets the agenda for ecumenism in the 21st century? In particular, are we prepared for the South to set the agenda? Youth? Marginalized groups? How can ecumenism in the 21st century reflect the rise of Pentecostalism and Evangelicals, the growth of megachurches and non-denominational churches? To what extent are we willing to change the ways we work for a more inclusive fellowship?
5. How can the ecumenical movement ensure that spirituality is at the center of our life together? For many of us, the ecumenical movement has always been about spirituality, but for many,

particularly young people, the search for spiritual growth is being sought outside the institutional church.

6. Finally, how can the ecumenical movement ensure constant renewal? How can young people be brought in? How can ecumenical formation ensure the next generation of ecumenical leaders?

These are some of the questions that come to my mind as I think about ecumenism in the 21st century. I'm sure that each of you has additional questions and issues to be raised. I want to close by affirming that WCC's role in this consultation is that of facilitating this first representative meeting on ecumenism in the 21st century. As you know, one of WCC's roles, as outlined in our constitution, is ensuring the coherence of the ecumenical movement. But it is this consultation itself which will decide on how the process will be carried forward (processes, tasks, timelines, etc.) Each of us has our own constituencies, mandates, and governing structures which need to be consulted.

These are important issues which need serious reflection, creative thinking and commitment. As His Holiness Aram I said at the Antelias consultation, "The ecumenical movement is in the hands of God; we are called, in obedient response to God's call, to protect and enrich it." We have much to do in these four days. We pray that the Holy Spirit will guide our work.