Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches

GENERAL INFORMATION

In August 2002, the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches will present its final report to the WCC Central Committee. The report and its recommendations will have far-reaching implications for the life and work of the WCC.

What is the Special Commission?
In response to the growing criticism of the WCC from its Orthodox member churches, and specifically to the appeal from an Eastern Orthodox meeting held at Thessaloniki in May 1998, a ‘Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC’ was mandated at the WCC’s Eighth Assembly in Harare, in December 1998. As WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser said at the Commission’s inaugural meeting, ‘never before in its fifty years of history has the WCC taken its Orthodox member churches as seriously’.

The WCC Harare Assembly:
- requested that the Special Commission study and analyze the whole spectrum of issues related to Orthodox participation in the WCC, recognizing that many of these concerns are of importance to other member churches as well;
- asked that the Special Commission make proposals concerning the necessary changes in structure, style and ethos of the WCC;
- suggested that such proposals be brought before the WCC Central Committee for consideration and decision, while any necessary constitutional changes will be presented to the next WCC assembly.

Background to the Special Commission
Since the foundation of the modern ecumenical movement, the main participants have been the churches coming from the ‘Protestant’ traditions (including Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist and Methodist) and the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches. Both Orthodox and Protestant churches have experienced a thirst for mutual discovery, and have been scandalized by Christian divisions. Their encounter has born much fruit: the churches know more about each other, they are able to do more together and, despite differences, they have uncovered convergence in matters of faith and life.

Orthodox-Protestant divergences
However, since the establishment of WCC in 1948, the Orthodox churches have regularly voiced their differences with the Protestant majority. Some profound divergences in the basic ecclesiology and self-understanding of Orthodox and Protestant churches have emerged. Orthodox concerns about the WCC reflect theological issues, as well as factors relating to the Council’s structure and work. Renewed tensions have resulted from new socio-political realities as well. Since 1997, two Orthodox churches, the churches of Georgia and Bulgaria, have withdrawn their membership from the WCC, and many Orthodox churches have faced mounting internal anti-ecumenical pressures.

How has the Special Commission worked?
The Special Commission was made up of an equal number of representatives of the Orthodox churches and from other WCC member churches. The Special Commission has met in four full plenary sessions since December 1999, and four sub-committees have focused on core issues. The Special Commission was co-moderated by Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Ephesus (Ecumenical Patriarchate) and Bishop Rolf Koppe (Evangelical Church in Germany).

What is the Special Commission proposing?
The final report of the Special Commission makes proposals for changes in the “structure, style and ethos of the WCC” in the following key areas:
- ecclesiological issues;
- decision-making processes;
- common prayer;
- social and ethical issues;
- issues related to membership.

Appendices to the final report provide further information and recommendations on the modalities of decision-making by consensus; on guidelines for common prayer at major WCC events; and proposals for changes to WCC membership and representation. The final report will be made available to WCC member churches following the deliberation and decisions of the Central Committee.

Further information and documentation relating to the work of the Special Commission is available on the WCC website:
- WCC Homepage:
  http://www.wcc-coe.org
- Special Commission Homepage:
  http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/special-01-e.html
- WCC Press Update on Report of the Special Commission:
- WCC articles on Orthodox-Protestant relations in WCC:
  http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/features-e.html
- Photos relating to Orthodox participation in the WCC:
  http://www.photooikoumene.org/events/orthpart/