

***The Global Christian Forum:
“Forum” as a Paradigm for the Future of Ecumenism?***

STEFAN HÖSCHELE, Theologische Hochschule Friedensau

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N.B.: [Page numbers in brackets] indicate the beginning of new pages in the German original.

Since the 1990s a pervasive feeling of crisis has repeatedly been the topic of discussion in the Ecumenical Movement, even though Konrad Raiser characterized the situation as “Ecumenism in Transition” as early as 1989, thereby interpreting the state of affairs – albeit still with a question mark – as a paradigm shift. Soon a “realistic ecumenism” was increasingly called for as a solution to the prevailing discomfort.¹ Moreover, a process of renewed reflection regarding the goals and vision of the World Council of Churches started at the same time; it led to the creation of the document *A Common Understanding and Vision* (CUV) as well as to the insight that a “reconfiguration” of not only the World Council of Churches but also of the Ecumenical Movement in general was essential.²

¹ Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC, 1991; German original: 1989); cf. Kurt Koch, *Gelähmte Ökumene: Was jetzt noch zu tun ist* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1991); Heinrich Döring, *Ist die Ökumene am Ende?* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1994), Michael Weinrich, *Ökumene am Ende? Plädoyer für einen neuen Realismus* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1994); Reinhard Frieling, *Im Glauben eins – in Kirchen getrennt? Visionen einer realistischen Ökumene* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006). Take note of the numerous question marks in these titles!

² Cf. Konrad Raiser, “Visionen und Werte der Ökumene auf dem Weg in die Zukunft”, *Ökumenische Rundschau* 54.1 (2005), 13–23; and various contributions in *Reformed World* 55.2 (2005): among others, Konrad Raiser, “Towards a New Ecumenical Configuration for the 21st Century”, 77–95; Hubert van Beek, “The Reconfiguration of the Ecumenical Movement: An Overview of the Discussion so Far”, 96–103; and Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia, “Towards a People-Centered Ecumenical Configuration”, 104–110.

But what does a realistic and reconfigured ecumenism look like? Which guiding metaphors, which models and how much variability are necessary for the ecumenical goal? What realistic and adequately “configured” relationships between churches are possible at all? This article will try to give a partial answer to this question, in particular with regard to an initiative that developed in connection [118] with the CUV process: the Global Christian Forum (GCF). First the background, development and preliminary results of the Global Christian Forum will be presented. Then various possible perspectives on the Forum will be analyzed. Finally, the question has to be answered just how successful the process of the Global Christian Forum can be in promoting realistic interchurch relations and in contributing to a configuration that one could describe as corresponding to the gospel.³

1. DEVELOPMENT, GOALS, AND PRELIMINARY RESULTS

In spite of a now ten-year history, so far one can hardly find any literature about the GCF.⁴ Nevertheless, the background and development of the Forum is easily traceable through the reports and communiqués of consultations published since 1998.⁵ The goals and the preliminary results of the Forum process can also be clearly stated.

The idea concerning an initiative that would create space for multifaceted interdenominational relationships outside of the WCC was proposed in the mid-1990s by Konrad Raiser, then the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. During the deliberations in the CUV process it was recognized that a reconfiguration of the WCC by

³ It was the goal of the author to present the following consideration of the Global Christian Forum as objectively and neutrally as possible. Naturally however, the viewpoint that this article takes is shaped by the background of the writer: my personal history and identity are those of an Adventist theologian. My denomination is known for its cautious attitude toward the World Council of Churches; in this respect it is similar to not only many Evangelical groups but also to numerous Pentecostal churches.

⁴ Thus far, Richard Howell (ed.), *Global Christian Forum: Transforming Ecumenism* (New Delhi: Evangelical Fellowship of India, 2007), is the only significant publication regarding this subject. Even in this book, however, only three of eleven essays directly deal with the GCF, two of them by Sarah Rowland Jones (“The Global Christian Forum: A Narrative History”, 1–31, and “The Global Christian Forum Renewing Our Global Ecumenical Method”, 140–181). The most important declarations of GCF Assemblies are also included (32–57).

⁵ The GCF maintains a website where important documents can be viewed; see <http://www.globalchristianforum.org/document> (accessed January 12, 2008). The manuscript available there, “The Global Christian Forum”, presents a collection of reports and an overview of the most important aspects of the GCF.

itself [119] would not fundamentally change the Ecumenical Movement as a whole, only an important part of this movement, one that was the most strongly institutionally-oriented, yet represented only about a quarter of Christianity. The fact that many Evangelical churches and most Pentecostal denominations as well as the Roman Catholic Church are not members of the WCC and are not aspiring to gain membership contributed to the growing realization that other types of multilateral relationships between churches are necessary.

The Forum idea then developed into a process with its own dynamic and led to a whole series of consultations that can be divided into two phases. In the first phase, the Forum idea had to be put into concrete terms. Thus in 1998 the first consultation, initiated by the WCC, was held in Geneva, and representatives of the WCC, the Christian World Communions⁶ and regional ecumenical organizations were invited. The main goal was to establish a “forum of Christian churches and ecumenical organizations” based on a confessional basis that corresponded to that of the WCC.⁷

A second and a third consultation took place in the years 2000 and 2002 at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena. This time the participants represented a broader spectrum of Christian groups: Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Evangelical and other Protestants. The name Global Christian Forum had already been established at the meeting in the year 2000, and a list of goals was developed that would be followed in principle in the further course of the Forum process:

The forum is intended:

To deepen our commitment to God’s mission in the world;

To enhance our understanding of contemporary expressions of Christian mission (Matt. 28:19, 20, Matt. 22:37–39, John 20:21 and Acts 1:8); [120]

To pursue principles and practices that would enable us to handle our Christian differences and distinctives creatively and peaceably;

To engage in theological reflection in areas of common concern;

To strengthen the wholeness of the church by encouraging communication and cooperation; and

To foster relationships that may lead to common witness.

⁶ On the ecumenical role of the Christian World Communions (worldwide denominational alliances and associations) cf. Harding Meyer, “Christian World Communions: Identity and Ecumenical Calling”, *Ecumenical Review* 46.4 (1994), 383–393.

⁷ The concluding document states: “Participation will be based on confessing the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scriptures and seeking to fulfill together the common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

At both assemblies the participants emphasized that the Forum should be a “space” rather than an organization; that it function like a “round table” rather than a decision-making committee, and that it should have the form of a “process” whose goal has not yet been written in stone. Consequently, there were methodological similarities with “Open Space”, a relatively new and increasingly popular style of moderation being used in large groups, which has helped facilitate many positive results in various companies and non-governmental organizations.⁸ At first glance, these relatively unstructured procedural methods may seem surprising; some observers surely asked themselves what good could come out of an international assembly that took place almost without an agenda. And yet there was a clear purpose that governed the entire discussion according to the communiqué of 2000: “ways to go beyond the present ecumenical structures”.

At the 2002 consultation a preliminary description of the Forum was formulated and added to the existing goals. It is of importance because it modified the formulation of the confessional basis (even though it did not substantially change it). Since then, the purpose of the GCF has been

To create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and interchurch organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, [121] can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.

At the same time it was decided to continue the Forum process in several regional consultations, which then took place from 2004 to 2007 with anywhere from several dozen to over 200 participants at each assembly. These consultations in Asia (2004 and 2006), Africa (2005), Europe (2006) und Latin America (2007), as well as a global gathering in 2007, represented a second phase in the development of the GCF.⁹ The assemblies met under identical themes (“Jesus Christ in [continent] – Our Journey with Him”), and at each one an extensive, one to two-day period of sharing personal Christian experiences was a crucial element. This method of “witnessing”, which is common among Pentecostal and Evangelical groups, offered an opportunity for all persons and traditions to listen and to contribute to the

⁸ Cf. Harrison Owen, *Expanding Our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1998). At the same time, the dynamics of this and the following consultations represent an atmosphere that can compared to the Round Tables of E. Stanley Jones; cf. his work *Christ at the Round Table* (New York: Abingdon, 1928).

⁹ Since 2001 in the USA there has been a regional movement that strongly resembles the GCF: Christian Churches Together; cf. <http://www.christianchurchestogether.org> (accessed January 12, 2008).

meeting; at the same time it helped those participants who had never encountered certain other Christian traditions to directly experience the unfamiliar Christian identity of others. As in 2002 this type of “sharing” thus became an innovative element of ecumenical praxis, one indispensable within the parameters of the GCF.

Naturally, some of the themes discussed on the different continents varied regionally.¹⁰ In Asia it was agreed in 2004 to meet a second time in 2006, and the participants there closely examined the interdenominational situation in various countries as well as the relationship among Christian umbrella organizations – the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia (EFA). They achieved a breakthrough in that the FABC and the CCA invited the EFA to join the Asian Movement for Christian Unity (AMCU) – an invitation which the EFA accepted. [122]

In Africa, where the Organization of African Instituted Churches was represented alongside the various other Christian traditions, a large variety of issues was addressed (e.g., HIV/AIDS, gospel and culture, the role of churches in society, Islam, Christian publications, African church history). This diversity indicates just how necessary it was to have a consultation in which such subjects could be addressed from a broad foundation. Interestingly, the assembly highlighted in particular the problematic nature of the terminology commonly used to characterize interdenominational relations (“ecumenical”, “evangelical”, “pentecostal”, “charismatic”).

The European consultation took place in 2006 in a Syrian Orthodox monastery in Warburg (Germany). The participants paid special attention to several countries in which changes in the interdenominational landscape were to be reported. In addition, some topics were discussed with which the Ecumenical Movement in Europe was already familiar: “common witness in the public sphere”; “new ways of expressing the Christian faith in a secularized Europe”; “proselytism, mission and evangelization”; migration and majority/minority situations; and interfaith relationships, especially with Muslims. The Latin American assembly in 2007 led to a declaration that emphasized not only the diversity but also the multifarious challenges of Christians in the region.

Finally, the global consultation in Nairobi in 2007 was hailed as a “historic achievement” and a “historic breakthrough” immediately after its conclusion; it was even said that the

¹⁰ On the following cf. Rowland Jones, “The Global Christian Forum: A Narrative History”.

Forum signals a “new paradigm for unity”.¹¹ The concluding report suggested that the Forum process be continued with a similar method as before, regionally (continent), nationally and locally, and that previously underrepresented groups (e.g., women, young people, indigenous people groups and disabled persons) be more involved.

What are the results of the Forum process thus far? [123]

1. The first thing to be emphasized is that the diversity of the participating Christian traditions represents, in and of itself, a significant success of the Forum. In Africa, Latin America and at the global consultation in 2007, the participants stressed that a gathering of so many different Christian churches constituted a historic event. In fact, in several cases representatives of different traditions came together who had never dialogued with each other before or who had encountered each other only in antagonistic situations.

2. More specifically, representatives of Pentecostal churches were involved on a large scale in a multilateral interdenominational process for the first time. Beyond the dialogues of Pentecostals with the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC, this is an important further advancement in the relationship between the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements and the rest of Christianity.

3. Since the Forum’s activities were undertaken on various continents, the process has already led in part to definite regional results; this is particularly the case in Asia, where the initiative of the GCF by adding Evangelical voices, was instrumental in expanding the *Asian Movement for Christian Unity*. The GCF also provided moral support to *Christian Churches Together* in the USA, which is independent of the GCF but similar in its operating principles.

4. The Forum process represents a distinct type of interdenominational relationships that primarily consist of listening to the experiences of others and sharing spirituality. Even though other elements of ecumenical practice are not excluded, the emphasis on the forms used by the GCF implies an ecumenical path whose future importance should not be underestimated. In whichever way the Forum process develops in the future – one thing is certain: The GCF offers an open space which is wide enough to act as a counterbalance to the dominance of certain Christian traditions in the Ecumenical Movement and other – for instance more institutional – concepts of ecumenism.

¹¹ Nicholas Jesson, “The Global Christian Forum, an Historic Achievement”, http://ecumenism.net/archive/2007/11/the_global_christian_forum_an_historic_achievement.htm, accessed January 1, 2012; “‘Historic Breakthrough’: Global Christian Forum to Continue and Invites Others Who May Be Interested”, <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/pressreleasesge.nsf/index/pu-07-28.html>, accessed January 4, 2008; “Global Christian Forum Signals New Paradigm”, *Ecumenical News International*, November 10, 2007.

2. PERSPECTIVES ON THE GLOBAL CHRISTIAN FORUM

After this report about the progress and results of Forum activities so far, the second part of the paper will address the question of how the Global Christian Forum can be evaluated. Contrasting perspectives are to be considered [124] in three matters: the significance of the Forum in general, the Forum's relationship to the WCC, and the assessment of the Forum's role for the ecumenical idea.

2.1 Significance: Not to Be Taken Seriously? A New Ecumenical Model?

Whether the Global Christian Forum will also be a serious project in the future remains, of course, to be seen in the coming years. Yet when one considers the results just mentioned, there is no question that the steps and progress so far should be taken seriously.

The idea of a forum that adds an important option to the already existing metaphors and working models of ecumenical relationships should be especially appreciated. Of course, a council, an alliance, federations, working groups, committees, conferences, mergers, sister churches, church fellowships and the like all have their rightful place and importance. Nevertheless a forum is both a metaphor and a working model that adds an essential element to these guiding ideas. Just like these other concepts and views, it implies a positive relationship in which both indifference as well as enmity are avoided. Moreover, a "forum" implies a weaker interdependency than is found in strong organizational structures; thus, the process character of the GCF allows for a maximum openness of working models and forms of fellowship.¹²

At the same time, a forum can be compared with the other metaphors only in a limited manner because almost all of them feature organizational forms that contain a stronger juridical component. In this respect, the Forum should not be viewed as a distinct ecumenical model, at least not at this time, but as a perspective on the ecumenical process, a method of interaction, and a framework in which interdenominational relationships can be shaped. This is also reflected by the fact that the GCF opens up space for a much more varied interpretation

¹² A comprehensive discussion of metaphors for the relationship between churches and the meaning of such metaphors for the ecumenical discourse does not yet exist. For an understanding of the separation between churches in metaphors, the following is helpful: Jaroslav Vokoun, "Die Trennung in Metaphern verstehen [Understanding Separation in Metaphors]", *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts Bensheim* 56 (2005), 8–12.

of the ecumenical [125] idea than does the WCC. While the World Council of Churches emphasizes visible unity as an ecumenical goal, the communiqués of the Global Christian Forum, at least so far, have avoided specifying ecclesiological views of unity. Therefore, the basis of the Forum is a consensus about the Christ-given spiritual unity of the church, which is then manifested in joint worship, in dialogue and listening as well as in personal encounters.

All in all, one has to emphasize that the Ecumenical Movement must certainly take the Global Christian Forum seriously; indeed, it can't *not* be taken seriously. At the same time however, the GCF does not represent a mature ecumenical model, at least not currently, but functions as a marketplace where varied relationships between churches are negotiated and lived out. It is also surely correct to characterize the GCF as a “new wave of ecumenism”;¹³ however, it remains to be seen how this wave develops, and whether it – as was occasionally expressed by Forum participants – presents an indication of a *kairos* for further new forms of church encounters and whether it will become a movement or even an institution that would serve as a future model for ecumenism.

2.2 Relationship to the WCC: “Ecumenism Lite?” An Alternative to the World Council of Churches?

Even now one has to ask, however, what kind of relationship the Forum has and will have to the World Council of Churches and whether an opposition could develop in some way between these two entities.

One thing is clear: the GCF is not a watered-down version of the WCC; rather it represents a new approach to denominational differences. Indeed, the question has already been asked from an evangelical standpoint if, concealed behind the facade of a new structure, this is not an attempt to implement a WCC agenda, possibly with the goal of excluding certain Christian groups¹⁴ or else to “lure” Evangelicals, Pentecostals or [126] other churches into the

¹³ According to the report “Europe Consultation on the Global Christian Forum: Report”, Warburg, June 19-22, 2006.

¹⁴ Cf. Thomas C. Oden, “The Not-So-New Ecumenism: A Recent Initiative Is Structured to Exclude Evangelicals in the Mainline”, *Christianity Today*, August 5, 2002, thinks, for example, that Christian Churches Together in the USA – and similarly the GCF – are so strongly shaped by the tradition of classical ecumenism that the many Evangelicals in the ecumenically-influenced Protestant churches would then again be pushed to the periphery.

WCC.¹⁵ First of all, however, the idea of a forum must be appreciated in which, from the very beginning, Christian groups which would not otherwise interact can come to sit at one table without having to become members of an organization. Of course the Forum thus also appears as a more non-committal variant of ecumenical existence; nonetheless, its designated course is not simply a lessening, but a qualitatively different or at least a differently accentuated form of relationships.

In this respect, activities in connection with the GCF may present an alternative to involvement in the WCC for some Christian traditions. Due to the fact that the Forum has no preconceived agenda, it provides a framework for a more strongly spiritually accented ecumenism, which is more attractive for certain groups than an activism-oriented WCC ecumenism or the dogmatics-oriented ecumenical understandings found in bi- and multilateral theological dialogues.

It is decidedly not the intention of the participants in the GCF to create a competition with the WCC. The difficulties that the Forum has already encountered thus far show that the movement cannot simply replace other forms of interdenominational relationships with the Forum concept. The Global Christian Forum is, so far, still not very well known; it needed a lot of time to bring its first global conference to fruition (longer than the two years originally thought); and it does not possess a secure financial basis. Furthermore, a few important groups, such as the Assemblies of God, have participated only marginally or not at all, and so far only matters largely agreed upon were discussed; controversial subjects have been avoided for the most part. The conferences in Asia and Africa also noted critically that there were too few non-Western persons represented in the Continuation Committee of the GCF; this has changed in the meantime.¹⁶ Such a [127] young and dynamic movement like the Forum

¹⁵ “The Global Christian Forum”, 5: “The Forum ... should not be perceived as a means to ‘lure’ Evangelicals, Pentecostals and others into the ecumenical movement as it is today. The Forum aims at creating a *new* space for encounter.”

¹⁶ In January 2008, representatives in the Continuation Committee were: Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (WCC), Metropolitan Mar Gregorios (Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch), Mikhail Gundiaev (Patriarchate of Moscow), Judy W. Mbugua (Association of Evangelicals in Africa), Han Sang-Ehil (Church of God [Cleveland]), John A. Radano (Papal counsel for the promotion of Christian unity), Richard Howell (Evangelical Alliance of India), Cecil M. Robeck (Pentecostal), Pirjo-Liisa Penttinen (Young Women’s Christian Association), Sarah Rowland Jones (Anglican Church), Fausto Vasconcelos (Baptist World Alliance), Hubert van Beek (Secretary of the GCF).

cannot, therefore, serve in any way as a replacement for the World Council of Churches due to these conditions; on the other hand, one can anticipate that the GCF will influence the WCC in some respects.¹⁷

Of special importance is the question as to whether the Forum will remain a forum or whether it will structurally solidify in the second decade of its existence, whether the vigour of the movement can be maintained or whether an institutionalization in the sense of churches holding membership will take place, as has been observed in the parallel movement Christian Churches Together in the USA. The future must therefore demonstrate whether the forum idea will stand the test of time.

2.3 Assessment: Diluting the Ecumenical Idea? Improving Ecumenical Structures?

Based upon the fact that its development started from dynamics in the WCC, in answering this third question one can say that it has certainly never been the Forum's intention to dilute the ecumenical idea,¹⁸ but (this has been repeatedly expressed in Forum reports) to risk taking a new approach to the Ecumenical [128] Movement that would achieve goals which have not yet been achieved elsewhere. Thus, as a more broadly based model, the Forum represents neither a superior nor an inferior type of interchurch relationships; moreover, it only appears to reflect less commitment – in reality, however, its essence is different.

Since the ecumenical idea has included a plurality of ideas on Christian unity from its inception, and because until today no comprehensive consensus regarding the goals and methods of uniting the churches has been found, the Forum represents one instrument among

¹⁷ It remains to be seen exactly what will happen in this respect. However, the fact that the WCC also emphasizes the open space aspect of its identity indicates how important the forum idea is; see, e.g., "Ecumenism in the 21st Century: Final Statement from the Consultation, 30 November–3 December 2004", *Ecumenical Review* 57.1 (2005), 97, 99. In this context it is also interesting to note that the Canadian Council of Churches has functioned as a "forum" since 1995 when the Roman Catholic Church joined the organization. Only decisions that achieve one hundred percent consensus are considered valid resolutions of the Canadian Council of Churches; all others are seen as joint decisions of some of the churches. See Jill Hawkey, *Mapping the Oikoumene: A Study of Current Ecumenical Structures and Relationships* (Geneva: WCC, 2005), 11.

¹⁸ According to the critical review of Rodney Petersen; it is unclear "who will be the driving force behind ... Will the Mormons become members? What about the Unitarians?" See his article "An Ecumenical 'Aggiornamento'?", *Boston Theological Institute Newsletter*, March 21, 2006, 1–2. This matter involves a double misunderstanding: on the one hand, there is no membership in the GCF; on the other hand, the participation of Unitarians and Mormons is hardly possible due to the Forum's trinitarian foundation.

many through which relationships among churches can be initiated, built up and cultivated. Perhaps the metaphor of a catalyst is also helpful; it brings about change in an almost imperceptible way. The GCF is an initiative that has produced almost no infrastructure, thus constituting only a minute part of the large framework of Christian traditions itself. Nevertheless this initiative can act as a catalyst to change the overall composition of the Ecumenical Movement. What exactly results at the end of the catalysis cannot yet be said, but it may be hoped that the process does not produce any toxic results but has a purifying effect.

3. A NEW ECUMENICAL PARADIGM?

If the Global Christian Forum can take on a catalytic function, the question should be asked as well whether it can also be more than just another ecumenical project. In other words: does the Forum reflect a way of thinking that is different from the conventional ecumenical modes of thinking? Is it perhaps leading to a novel viewpoint altogether, from which the relationship of churches to each other and the unity of the church can be considered? Or more succinctly: does it imply a new ecumenical paradigm? In this final section, a few theses will be presented and discussed that point in this direction. [129]

1. No single ecumenical model can lay claim to universal validity; different forms of relationships among Christian churches complement each other, provided they do not directly oppose each other. The Global Christian Forum expands the ecumenical discourse and the common ecumenical working models, thus adding a significant option.

From the very beginning of the modern Ecumenical Movement there has been a plurality of ecumenical models. Even the World Council of Churches has recognized this plurality since the time of its founding and has tried not to give preference to any concept of unity. The formulation “visible unity” alone has become a central maxim, even though it has been interpreted in various ways. The GCF does not oppose efforts to build visible unity – be it through theological dialogue with the goal of a consensus or by reciprocal recognition of one sort or another. The main emphasis of the Forum, however, evidently lies in the experience of Christian fellowship, and it represents a place of respect for such traditions that do not strive for a juridically conceived kind of unity and yet believe in the unity of the church. This step towards a further pluralization of the ecumenical landscape is convincing insofar as there exists a real plurality of models of unity, which is thus expressed.

2. One result of research in the sociology of religion is that religious diversity is necessary for the health of religious life. Something similar can be postulated for ecumenism:

A plurality of spaces for interdenominational relations contributes to lively and vital relationships among churches.

Occasionally voices in the Ecumenical Movement have raised the question as to whether the multiplicity of ecumenical organizations and initiatives is not obstructive for ecumenism as a whole. Thus one must ask whether the GCF does not represent another scrap piece resulting from the such fragmentation. Wouldn't it be easier, clearer and more unifying for one entity – and that being the WCC – to hold all the threads together?¹⁹ At first glance it seems obvious that this concern arises from the ecumenical idea itself. If the Ecumenical Movement doesn't practice visible unity, how then shall the churches?

On the other hand, such a view would be a monopoly way of thinking with the downside of an “all or nothing” attitude. With such a thinking, it seems logical that a church cannot get involved in interdenominational relationships partially but must commit itself completely to the ecumenical idea through a membership. This is, however, [130] not the case even in the WCC. Besides the membership status, there are observers; non-members also collaborate in the committees of the WCC – such as the Roman Catholic Church in the Commission on Faith and Order; and in national church councils one finds, in part, a further gradation – members, guests and observers. There is, therefore, an already built-in plurality present in the institutionalized ecumenism of the World Council of Churches and corresponding national organizations.

In addition, the North American sociology of religion shows that religious monopolies usually do not lead to a vitality of church life but likely hinder it.²⁰ Something similar is certainly valid for ecumenism: A variety of interdenominational “spaces” enables the fostering of relationships among churches. Only when sufficient options are available for the interaction of churches can dialogue and various forms of collaboration succeed. In this respect a certain pluralization of the ecumenical scene is truly a sociologically-based mandate.²¹ Even though not arising from sociological considerations but due to ecumenical challenges themselves, the Global Christian Forum corresponds to this sociological insight.

¹⁹ Cf. “Ecumenism in the 21st Century”, 94.

²⁰ Cf. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Rodney Stark und Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

²¹ Cf. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Unity, Diversity, and Apostolicity: Any Hopes for Rapprochement between

3. *For many churches the Global Christian Forum and similar forms of interdenominational, multilateral encounter and collaboration will continue to be more acceptable than the WCC. In this respect the forum idea could become an important paradigm for the future of ecumenism.*

For many Pentecostal churches and some African Instituted Churches, as well as for churches that count themselves as part of the Evangelical Movement [131] and other specific denominations such as the Seventh-day Adventists, the Global Christian Forum agrees much more with their ideas regarding interchurch relations than membership in formal organizations. This means that from a practical perspective this form of encounter among the churches is of great significance.

In addition the GCF, being a network-oriented entity, is more flexible than entities with a more fixed organizational structure; in spite of theological breadth, strong institutions always create an in-group and an out-group.²² Thus the Forum corresponds to sociological reflections on the future of interdenominational relationships that refer to the potential of a “networking ecumenism”.²³ Networks imply flat, even almost nonexistent hierarchies that manifest themselves in the GCF through shared worship and time spent in listening to the testimonies of others. The network metaphor is also helpful in that it implies a medium that allows the intensity of relationships to vary: the GCF affords room for close and less close relationships, but in every case the relationships tend to be positive. Different from the German Protestant vote for “orderly fellowship among churches of different confessions”,²⁴ the GCF therefore

Older and Younger Churches?”, Lecture at the LEST VI Congress “Believing in Community: Ecumenical Reflections on the Church”, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, November 9, 2007, 12. Kärkkäinen suggests that Christianity should, for interdenominational encounter and ecumenism, “devise structures and institutions that are as different as the life of the church on the global level”; he also advocates “fighting against an overly idealized view of churches, apostolicity and ecumenism”, for from a free church viewpoint “partial church fellowship”, not “full church fellowship” is the goal of ecumenism.

²² “Richard Howell and Efraim Tendero pointed to the contradiction between the inclusiveness of ecumenism and the exclusive character of the WCC and the ecumenical movement which does not provide room for the evangelicals.” See “The Global Christian Forum: Report of the Asia Follow-Up Meeting”, September 21-23, 2006, Bangkok, 8.

²³ Henk Witte, “From System into Networking: The Social Shape of Ecumenism in the 21st Century”, *Exchange* 34 (2005), 386–396.

²⁴ *Kirchengemeinschaft nach evangelischem Verständnis: Ein Votum zum geordneten Miteinander bekenntnisverschiedener Kirchen*, EKD-Texte 69 (Hannover: Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland,

refrains from using the metaphor of “order” as its central theme; rather it represents a dynamic, brotherly fellowship of Christian churches. Is it too daring to conclude that idea behind the Forum process implies a chance for a new ecumenical paradigm?²⁵ [132]

4. The Global Christian Forum promotes a cooperation of Christian churches that corresponds to the gospel if it preserves its working style and if it rises to the challenge of different understandings of the gospel by collectively grappling with the Holy Scriptures and its explanation.

The aspects of ecumenical history, sociology of religion, and practice evidently do not suffice when evaluating a project such as the Global Christian Forum. The pivotal question is whether the Forum is in accordance with the gospel and whether it advances a fellowship of Christian churches that corresponds to it.

One must note first of all that the GCF fends off a legalistic concept of ecumenism, in which proper relationships to other churches would be equated with membership in the World Council of Churches or in other established ecumenical forms of organization. In other words, there is no second-class ecumenism; the fact that Christians of different backgrounds experience the unity of the church and the relationship among churches in different ways shaped by scriptural interpretation and tradition must be accepted. The gospel of God’s grace also liberates to a gracious handling of the various understandings of appropriate relationships among the denominations.

Another insight that corresponds to the gospel is one that attributes equality to the churches; this insight finds expression in the GCF through the open space metaphor, through the process-oriented character of the Forum and through the inclusion of all major Christian traditions. Obviously, as a result hierarchies and professionalization play a subordinate role; the “round table” principle in the Forum reflects something of the priesthood of all believers and of the early Christian conviction that in Christ the differences between people become less important.

2001).

²⁵ Without belabouring at length the oft-quoted paradigm theory by Thomas Kuhn, it is evident that the framework of interdenominational relationships has changed repeatedly, even in the 19th and 20th centuries; cf. the discussion of such paradigms by Reinhard Frieling, “Steht die ökumenische Bewegung vor einem Paradigmenwechsel?” in id., *Im Glauben eins – in Kirchen getrennt?*, 228–255.

One aspect of the Forum process that can be viewed as a weakness is the fact that theologically divisive questions have thus far not been addressed. Although becoming acquainted with each other and listening to one another is unquestionably of great importance, Forum gatherings in the future must ask themselves what role corporate listening to Scripture should have. Even if this may not be assessed as programmatic, the fact that in the foundation of the GCF and in the list of its goals a reference to the Bible is lacking (while in the basis [133] of the WCC the confession of Jesus Christ “according to the scriptures” is explicitly emphasized) makes it yet unclear how the GCF will handle theological dissent in the future and what significance will thereby be given to the role of the Bible.

Beyond this open question, however, the assessment made by Sarah Rowland Jones may give reason to hope that in the Global Christian Forum God himself is the starting point – not formulations shaped by philosophical rationalities, traditions and theologies, not ecclesiologies as well, but rather God Himself, who became human in Jesus Christ. In spite of the undeniable significance of doctrine, this leads, according to Rowland Jones, to a more relational understanding of theology and faith, in which the Christian faith develops its own rationality according to the gospel. If this is accurate, one desires to ask: Who wouldn’t wish that the relationship among Christian churches, even above and beyond the Global Christian Forum, would be characterized by a paradigm in which God and the gospel itself stand at the centre?