

Greeting on behalf of the Global Christian Forum

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I am delighted to have the opportunity to bring to this Council meeting the greetings, prayers and best wishes of the Global Christian Forum, on whose guiding Committee I serve on behalf of the LWF. Many of you will remember earlier greetings from the Forum's secretary Larry Miller, a long-time friend of the LWF from his time as General Secretary of the Mennonite World Conference; when I joined him last week on a panel presenting the Forum, he sent his own warmest good wishes for this Council.

The aims of the Forum are relational ones -- I could also say conversational ones -- with the intent and hope that the uniquely inclusive reach of these relationships in Forum settings can play a distinctive role in promoting Christian unity. The GCF describes itself as "an open space where all Christians can meet to nurture unity by fostering mutual respect and understanding as well as by addressing together common challenges." As many of you know, it arose in response to transformations in the Christian family within the lifetimes of many of us here, so that one-quarter of the world's Christians now come from evangelical and Pentecostal groups, many of them in the Global South, and many, for multiple reasons, outside existing ecumenical conversations. The GCF counts among its central supporting organizations the WCC, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and the World Evangelical Alliance. From the beginning Lutheran churches have been prominent among its consistent strong supporters, and for that the Forum expresses its deep thanks.

In the bilateral theological dialogues from which the LWF has profited so richly, we learn from what we say to one another. In Forum settings, we learn especially from conversations we are positioned to overhear -- between a Russian Orthodox priest and a Pentecostal evangelist on church renewal, for example, or between a pastor of an African Instituted Church and a Catholic theologian on how stories of holiness can strengthen discipleship--with a German Lutheran providing interjections. Central to the Forum's method is the sharing of

personal stories of faith, since this is a place from which everyone can begin. The question for all participants, a question implicitly encouraging the answer “yes,” is, “Do you recognize the face of Christ in these story tellers; do you hear the work of the Spirit in the stories of their communities?” This method is used in international gatherings, of which the Forum has had two, in Kenya and Indonesia, with plans for a third, most likely in Cuba, in early 2018. This stereotype-breaking approach is also a powerful starting point in the regional gatherings in which the Forum does some of its best work, and is a practice that is easily transferable to many other settings, even at very local levels.

From such conversations has arisen the desire to have more focused attention to “common challenges” which emerged from the encounters, taking advantage of the uniquely broad Forum participation. Over the Forum’s life, one topic arose most persistently; it was the one arousing the most hesitation and requiring considerable time to develop sufficient trust to address. This is the subject of inner-Christian “proselytism” -- experienced as “sheep stealing” by some churches and defended by others as “growing greener grass.” Planning for this conversation will continue later this year; it will be a crucial and somewhat risky moment for the Forum, for which it invites your prayers. Last November was the first such conversation convened by the GCF, for which 140 church leaders from 65 nations came to Tirana, Albania, to examine the theme of “Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together.” Faithfulness in difficult circumstances is a common challenge that can bring together churches that on other questions are far separated and can strengthen them in recognition of the universal human right of religious freedom.

In all its work, the GCF seeks to provide additional avenues toward the unity among Christians that we know to be Christ’s prayer. For us Lutherans, it is an often complementary approach to our most characteristic ways of relating, and sometimes takes us outside our “comfort zones” in ways that can be challenging and creative. The GCF gives thanks for the LWF and its work, and joins in prayer for the flourishing of all that it undertakes in the anniversary year that lies before it. Thanks be to God.