

PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES



TOWARD
A COMMON UNDERSTANDING AND VISION
FOR THE
PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

A STUDY AND DISCUSSION RESOURCE

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Introduction

This resource provides common study and reflection material for the Steering Committee, action teams, and committees of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches during the 2004–2005 biennium. It builds on our study of and reflection on *Councils of Churches and the Ecumenical Vision* (by Diane Kessler and Michael Kinnamon) during the 2002–2003 biennium.

The principle document to which we will be attending is *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches*.¹ As its preface traces, this document is the product of a long, evolving discussion about the nature and purpose of that global conciliar ecumenical agency. By working through how a similar—though much larger and more complex—expression of the ecumenical movement has come to understand itself and articulate its challenges we, in the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, might become more clear about our own identity, commitments, and challenges. Let me be clear: I want *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches* to inform our reflection and discussion, but I am not proposing that we adopt this World Council of Churches document as our own. We may learn from it, but we must do so mindful of our own context.

We will also be attending to scripture during our reflections, examining some of the classic passages in which the ecumenical movement has traditionally found its warrant and exploring some of the biblical metaphors for the church. These are passages of scripture we all know well: perhaps, though, by talking of them together we can help each other break the bonds of familiarity and free each other to hear them anew.

Whether we are examining Bible passages or paragraphs of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches*, I hope we will discover and articulate both things we hold in common and things on which we differ. Ecumenism in this country suffers from many things, one of which is excess amiability. With the exception of some recent reaction to decisions made by the Episcopal Church in 2003, most of the time we are politely amiable with each other. But this amiability comes with a price: we don't ask hard, critical questions and don't push each other to be clear about what we believe and why. We have good—but superficial—relationships. I hope, through candid conversation, we can maintain good relationships but make them deeper, more knowledgeable, and more caring.

The key for keeping good relationships in the midst of difference is, it seems to me, adopting an attitude of “both—and” rather than “either—or.” There may be times when we must draw the proverbial line, but beginning with that attitude rarely advances the quality or depth of the relationship. Unfortunately, “either—or” is the all-too-common stance in the face of political, social, and religious difference. And, it shows up in ecumenism as well: either unity or common ministry; either pan-Christian or interreligious; either being or doing; either clergy or lay; and so on. As we work to surface both our similarities and our differences, let's also use a “both—and” attitude. There will always be opportunity to reject someone's perspective later; let's try, at the beginning, to see whether we can live with it.

The Shape Of This Study & Discussion Resource

This simple document has three sections: (1) this introduction, which provides an orientation to the shape and intention of the resource; (2) the complete text of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches*; and (3) outlines for four study/discussion sessions, each one focusing on both *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches* and one or more passages of scripture.

Action teams and their committees, together with the Governing Board and the Steering Committee, are urged to set aside no less than 30 minutes at four regularly scheduled meetings during the biennium to share in this process. Common Council-wide conversation will be invaluable in reaching our own “common understanding and vision” for the Pennsylvania Council of Churches.

You, as a participant, have several responsibilities in this process. I urge you to

- ✘ Read *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches* in its entirety well before your meeting.
- ✘ Look over the study/discussion outline before your meeting, beginning to reflect on the questions posed.
- ✘ Bring this resource, **together with a Bible** (in a translation of your own choosing) to each meeting.
- ✘ Participate in the discussion, sharing candidly and freely.

Thank you for participating in the common Council-wide conversation. Both our being as a Council and our doing of ministry together will be strengthened.

Gary L. Harke,
Executive director
January 15, 2004

TOWARDS A COMMON UNDERSTANDING AND VISION OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Preface

The text that follows is the outcome of more than eight years of study and consultation on the “common understanding and vision of the World Council of Churches”, mandated by the WCC Central Committee at its meeting in 1989. Since the Seventh Assembly of the WCC in 1991, this subject has continuously been on the agenda of the Central Committee; in addition, it has been extensively discussed in meetings of WCC commissions, advisory bodies and staff. Insights have been sought and received from WCC member churches, other churches and a broad range of ecumenical partners, as well as many individual participants in and students of the ecumenical movement.

The WCC Executive Committee agreed in February 1995 that this process of consultation should aim at preparing a document for the Eighth Assembly, on the occasion of the WCC’s 50th anniversary, which might serve as an “ecumenical charter” for the 21st century. In September 1995, the Central Committee approved a procedure for preparing such a text. An initial draft came from a consultation in December 1995 which brought together some 35 persons from all regions and church traditions. This was shared with a variety of groups and individuals, then revised in June 1996 and sent to the Central Committee for discussion in September 1996. Its responses were incorporated into a “working draft” distributed to WCC member churches and ecumenical partners, who were asked to react to it by the end of June 1997. On the basis of some 153 written responses received from member churches and ecumenical bodies, as well as discussions during personal visits by WCC staff and others to many churches and partners, a new draft was presented to the Central Committee for discussion at its meeting in September 1997. The text that follows incorporates amendments proposed during that meeting.

The text seeks to address the most important issues that have surfaced during this discussion. Chapter 1 sets the context for the “Common Understanding and Vision” process, outlining some of the changes during the half-century since the founding of the World Council and noting that this document takes its place in a continuing series of efforts over the course of those years to articulate the nature and purpose of ecumenical fellowship within the WCC. Chapter 2 explores the meaning of the ecumenical movement, out of which the WCC grew and of which it is one of many organizational expressions. Chapter 3 discusses the “self-understanding” of the World Council of Churches, fundamentally by explicating its constitutional Basis as a “fellowship of churches” that seek

to fulfill “a common calling”, then suggesting some implications of this for its life and work as an organization. Chapter 4 speaks of the relationships between the WCC and the many kinds of partners with whom it shares the ecumenical vocation.

The rich, extensive and enthusiastic discussions that have gone into this text have attested to a profound ecumenical engagement and commitment to the WCC among member churches and partners. But it has also become clear that within this “common understanding and vision” there are a number of specific points regarding the goal of the ecumenical movement and the nature of the fellowship already experienced on which the churches do not as yet agree. In bringing this present stage of the process of consultation to an end through adoption of this text as a policy statement, the Central Committee does not claim the authority to resolve these issues or to speak the final word on the WCC and the ecumenical movement.

It is of the essence of the churches’ fellowship within the ecumenical movement that they continue to wrestle with these differences in a spirit of mutual understanding, commitment and accountability. The present text is thus commended to the churches to encourage and help them to evaluate their own ecumenical commitments and practice—in their own local contexts, in their national, regional and global relationships and, specifically, in relation to the World Council of Churches.

By way of implementing this policy document, the Central Committee has also taken several other steps. It has amended the rules for its own operation in order to enable the Council to respond more effectively to the needs of its member churches; it has proposed to the Eighth Assembly an amended statement of the purposes and functions of the WCC along the lines suggested in paragraph 3.12; it has approved the outline of a new programme and management structure for the WCC; and it has mandated continued study of both its styles of internal operation and the possibilities of wider ecumenical partnership.

Chapter I

Introduction

^{1.1}The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the World Council of Churches provides the member churches with an opportunity to reaffirm their ecumenical vocation and to clarify their common understanding of the WCC.

Changing contexts, enduring commitments

^{1.2}Through the WCC the churches have worked together, reflected together and worshipped together. Restless to grow together according to the prayer of Jesus Christ that all may be one in order that the world may believe (John 17:21), they have been sustained by the assurance of God's purpose to unite all things in Christ - things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:10). Although their common life has been tested during this half century, the resolution expressed by the founding Assembly at Amsterdam in 1948—"We intend to stay together"—has by God's grace been maintained.

^{1.3}As the member churches of the WCC seek together to discern the promises and challenges of a new century and a new millennium, the WCC and the ecumenical movement are passing through a period of uncertainty. There are signs of a weakening of ecumenical commitment, of a growing distance between the WCC and its member churches, and of a widespread perception among the young generation that the ecumenical movement has lost its vitality and does not provide relevant answers to the pressing problems of today. Internal factors are preventing many churches from maintaining their level of financial support, thus obliging the WCC to reduce its activities; and some member churches are experiencing internal conflicts and even the threat of schism because of their participation in the ecumenical fellowship. All this gives added urgency to the effort of clarifying a common understanding of the WCC and its role within the ecumenical movement.

^{1.4}Nevertheless, some of the astonishing changes in the Council and in the ecumenical movement during these first fifty years should be recalled:

- ✘ ^{1.4.1}the number of WCC member churches has more than doubled since the Amsterdam Assembly; the Council today brings together churches of very diverse cultural backgrounds and Christian traditions, including Orthodox churches and churches from nearly every Protestant tradition;
- ✘ ^{1.4.2}while nearly two-thirds of the churches which founded the WCC came from Europe and North America, nearly two-thirds of its member churches today come from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East and the Pacific, making the Council more truly a world body;
- ✘ ^{1.4.3}the new councils of churches and other ecumenical bodies formed in many local, national and regional

contexts have created a genuinely worldwide ecumenical network of which the WCC is now an integral part;

- ✘ ^{1.4.4}the Roman Catholic Church, which maintained a deliberate distance from the ecumenical movement at the time of the founding of the WCC, has become a full member of many national ecumenical bodies and of several regional ecumenical organizations and maintains regular working relationships with the WCC, especially through official membership of the Commission on Faith and Order;
- ✘ ^{1.4.5}the participation of women in the life of the WCC has increased and their voices have been strengthened in ecumenical gatherings;
- ✘ ^{1.4.6}an emerging common tradition of shared convictions on faith, life and witness has begun to enrich theological reflection undertaken from a strictly confessional perspective as the churches have drawn closer to each other through the WCC.

^{1.5}The ecumenical process which led to the formation of the WCC was not only a response to the gospel imperative of Christian unity. It was also an affirmation of the call to mission and common witness and an expression of common commitment to the search for justice, peace and reconciliation in a chaotic, warring world divided along the lines of race, class and competing national and religious loyalties.

^{1.6}The past fifty years have posed severe tests to the intention of this fellowship to witness credibly to the universality of Christ's church in a divided world and to God's purpose for the whole of humankind. Often, the churches have been too much like the world, participating in its divisions, accepting and sometimes even reinforcing images of the other as the enemy. But at times, even in the darkest moments of the Cold War, WCC member churches and courageous women and men within them have built bridges across ideological divides.

^{1.7}In these five decades profound changes have taken place in the world as well as among the churches. The major problems have shifted, but not disappeared; and in the new forms which they are taking some are even more acute than before. Even though colonialism has practically disappeared, many of the nations to emerge from former colonies are subject to new kinds of economic and political dependency which bring growing misery upon their peoples. Even though the Cold War has ended and the nuclear arms race has been slowed down, wars are still being fought. New sources of violent conflict have emerged from racial and ethnic tensions. Even though inter-religious encounter and dialogue have become more common, religious loyalties continue to be used to foment hatred and violence. Despite nearly universal legal and constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, the situation of religious minorities, including some Christian churches, has in fact become increasingly precarious in many places; elsewhere, the very principles of religious freedom are being challenged or have given rise to new conflicts. Where cruder

expressions of militarism have receded, they have often been replaced by more sophisticated forms of military predominance supported by high technology. International solidarity is giving way to fear and xenophobia as the numbers increase of those leaving their homelands to escape oppression, conflict or chronic poverty and unemployment. As the gap between rich and poor widens, the situation of more and more millions of people is disregarded and even entire nations are treated as expendable. Violence is increasing everywhere, with children and women its principal victims. Political institutions at every level are rapidly losing the confidence of citizens who perceive them as corrupt and out of touch; and their decision-making role is increasingly subordinated to the demands of global business empires whose accountability is measured only in terms of the profits they earn. The growing awareness of threats to the earth's ecology is not matched by a will to make radical changes in life-styles and forms of production. The contemporary global crisis has moral and spiritual dimensions no less profound than the crisis which faced the world in the earliest stages of the ecumenical movement. But the moral foundations of human community have in the meantime become even more fragile.

^{1.8}The challenge of what it means to be part of the universal church of Christ is posed in new and dramatic ways by the process of growing globalization. Every church must begin its examination of its ecumenical relationships by self-examination: in its life and witness in this global context has it been consistently guided by the common calling to unity, mission and service? Has it drawn the consequences of the communion it has experienced, the widening of the common vision it has gained, the commitments it has accepted? In fact, many indications suggest that a growing denominationalism is reinforcing the tendency of churches to concentrate on their internal and institutional concerns at the expense of their ecumenical commitment. In responding to the call to mission and evangelism churches too often ignore their commitment to common witness and thus introduce or promote divisions within the Christian family. While Christians and churches should be advocates of the rights and dignity of those marginalized and excluded by society, there are shameful examples of complicity with structures of social and economic injustice. Nor has the World Council of Churches in its struggles for justice and human rights been able to act and speak according to the same criteria everywhere.

^{1.9}Many churches and Christian communities, including some whose witness is vital and whose growth is rapid, have remained outside the fellowship of formal ecumenical bodies. New sources of division have appeared both within and among churches. In some churches, things which have been said or done ecumenically have proved so contentious that ecumenical commitment is itself rejected as heretical or even anti-Christian. At every level, from the local to the global, churches and ecumenical bodies have found themselves in

competition with each other when they ought to have cooperated.

Refocusing our understanding

^{1.10}These limitations, setbacks and failures call the ecumenical movement and the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches to repentance and conversion, renewal and reorientation as a new millennium approaches. If a new generation is to make its own the commitment expressed in Amsterdam, the understanding of the place and role of the WCC in the ecumenical movement must be given new focus. What are the distinctive marks of *ecumenical* commitment that make it different from, even though related to, the many cooperative initiatives to be found in civil society? What is the particular role of the WCC as an organization in its relationship to other partners in the ecumenical movement? How has the understanding of the purposes and "common calling" of the WCC changed in the light of what has been learned during five decades of life together? What can be learned from the signs of new ecumenical vitality among movements of lay people, women and youth?

^{1.11}The answer to such questions will draw on the insights of the many men and women who have wrestled with them before.

^{1.12}In 1950, the WCC Central Committee, meeting in Toronto, formulated a text on "The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches", which remains foundational for any common understanding of the Council. This "Toronto Statement" is in two parts. The first makes five declarations about what the WCC is *not*:

- ✘ *The WCC is not and must never become a superchurch.*
- ✘ *The purpose of the WCC is not to negotiate unions between churches (which can be done only by the churches themselves).*
- ✘ *The WCC cannot and should not be based on any one particular conception of the church.*
- ✘ *Membership in the WCC does not imply that a church treats its own conception of the church as merely relative.*
- ✘ *Membership in the WCC does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of church unity.*

The second part offers eight positive assumptions which underlie life in the Council. The member churches:

- ✘ *believe that conversation, cooperation and common witness of the churches must be based on the common recognition that Christ is the divine Head of the body;*
- ✘ *believe on the basis of the New Testament that the church of Christ is one;*
- ✘ *recognize that the membership of the church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own church body;*

- ✘ *consider the relationship of other churches to the holy catholic church which the creeds profess as a subject for mutual consideration;*
- ✘ *recognize in other churches elements of the true church;*
- ✘ *are willing to consult together in seeking to learn of the Lord Jesus Christ what witness he would have them to bear to the world in his name;*
- ✘ *should recognize their solidarity with each other, render assistance to each other in case of need and refrain from such actions as are incompatible with brotherly [and sisterly] relationships;*
- ✘ *enter into spiritual relationships through which they seek to learn from each other and to give help to each other in order that the body of Christ may be built up and that the life of the churches may be renewed.*

^{1.13}Important explications of the Basis, nature and purpose of the World Council of Churches have been offered through its successive Assemblies. The New Delhi Assembly (1961) not only enlarged the christological Basis from a trinitarian perspective but also acknowledged the “common calling” of the churches, which was tangibly expressed by the integration of the International Missionary Council into the WCC. The same Assembly also saw the entry of several large Orthodox churches into the fellowship of the WCC and accepted the first formal statement on “the church’s unity”: “We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into a fully committed fellowship...”

^{1.14}The Assemblies in Uppsala (1968), Nairobi (1975), Vancouver (1983) and Canberra (1991) continued to deepen this common understanding by unfolding the quest for unity in its universal dimension, embracing the human community as well as the church. They explored such concepts as conciliarity and conciliar fellowship (Uppsala and Nairobi), a eucharistic vision (Vancouver) and “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling” (Canberra).

^{1.15}Many other such significant declarations, both within the WCC and in other ecumenical contexts, could be mentioned. Yet for many people the understanding of the WCC as a living fellowship of churches has emerged more vividly through specific initiatives to engage the churches in reflecting and acting at the local level: among them the Programme to Combat Racism, the convergence texts on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, the study on the Community of Women and Men in the Church, the conciliar process on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, the Ecumenical Decade—Churches in Solidarity with Women, the study on Gospel and Culture and the Programme to Overcome Violence. Controversial though some of these have been among and within the member churches, they are important features of the profile of

the WCC; and any attempt to articulate a common understanding of the WCC must take them into account.

Chapter 2

The Ecumenical Movement

^{2.1}It is impossible to speak of the World Council of Churches apart from the ecumenical movement out of which it grew and of which it is a highly visible part. While the ecumenical movement is wider than its organizational expressions, and while the WCC is essentially the fellowship of its member churches, it serves at the same time as a prominent instrument and expression of the ecumenical movement. As such it is an advocate of the impulse for renewal which has characterized the movement from its beginnings.

The meaning of “ecumenical”

^{2.2}Among churches and ecumenical organizations uncertainty, ambiguity and even confusion prevail about what is meant by the “ecumenical movement”. There is agreement that the term “ecumenical” embraces the quest for Christian unity, common witness in the worldwide task of mission and evangelism, and commitment to diakonia and to the promotion of justice and peace. But there is no authoritative definition of the term, and it is in fact used to characterize a wide range of activities, ideas and organizational arrangements.

^{2.3}Perhaps the best-known definition is that formulated by the WCC’s Central Committee, meeting at Rolle, in 1951:

It is important to insist that the word [ecumenical], which comes from the Greek word for the whole inhabited earth [oikoumene], is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the gospel to the whole world.

This sought to expand previous definitions by integrating the concern for church unity and the concern for cooperative mission and evangelism.

^{2.4}More recent descriptions of the goal of the ecumenical movement have sought to take seriously the conviction that the object of God’s reconciling purpose is not only the church but the whole of humanity—indeed, the whole of creation. Thus, the WCC’s Vancouver Assembly (1983) spoke of a “eucharistic vision” which

unites our two profoundest ecumenical concerns: the unity and renewal of the church and the healing and destiny of the human community. Church unity is vital to the health of the church and to the future of the human family... Christ—the life of the world—unites heaven and earth, God and world, spiritual and secular. His body and blood, given to us in the elements of bread

and wine, integrate liturgy and diaconate, proclamation and acts of healing... Our eucharistic vision thus encompasses the whole reality of Christian worship, life and witness.

The Canberra Assembly (1991) added: “We need desperately a mobilizing portrait of reconciled life that will hold together an absolute commitment to the unity and renewal of the church and an absolute commitment to the reconciliation of God’s world... We need to affirm the vision of an inhabited world (*oikoumene*) based on values which promote life for all.” However, these two Assembly statements do not go much beyond the affirmation that the various dimensions need to be held together.

^{2.5}Within the ecumenical movement the WCC has sought to integrate the vision of John 17:21 (“that they may all be one... so that the world may believe”) with the vision of Ephesians 1:10 (God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth”). But the effort to integrate these two biblical visions has been challenged by a continuing tension and sometimes antagonism between those who advocate the primacy of the social dimension of ecumenism and those who advocate the primacy of spiritual or ecclesial ecumenism.

^{2.6}More recently, a growing number of voices from the churches, especially in Asia but also in Latin America, have spoken of the need for a “wider ecumenism” or “macro-ecumenism”—an understanding which would open the ecumenical movement to other religious and cultural traditions beyond the Christian community.

^{2.7}These ambiguities surrounding the understanding of “ecumenical” create the real danger of introducing competitive divisions into the ecumenical movement. What is the meaning and purpose of this movement? Who are its subjects? What are its goals and methods or forms of action? What is the source of the dynamic which warrants speaking of the “ecumenical movement” beyond its institutional manifestations in the WCC and elsewhere?

Some basic distinctions and marks of identification

^{2.8}In the present situation of uncertainty and transition, the ambiguities surrounding the meaning of the term “ecumenical” will not be resolved by a descriptive—even less a normative—definition which identifies a particular model, strategy or organizational affiliation as criteria for what is “ecumenical”. Any common understanding will have to embrace multiple perspectives and a diversity of subjects. Nevertheless, a number of basic distinctions may help to clarify the use of the term here:

- ✠ ^{2.8.1}The dynamic of the ecumenical movement is rooted in the tension between the churches as they are and the true *koinonia* with the triune God and among one another which is their calling and God’s gift.

- ✠ ^{2.8.2}The ecumenical vision encompasses the renewal of church and world in the light of the gospel of God’s kingdom. In the face of all threats to life it affirms the Christian hope of life for all
- ✠ ^{2.8.3}The ecumenical movement, while it shares in other efforts at international, inter-cultural, and interreligious cooperation and dialogue, is rooted in the life of the Christian churches. Yet it is not limited to the concern for inter-church relationships and is wider than the various organizations in which it has found expression.
- ✠ ^{2.8.4}The ecumenical movement seeks to foster cooperation and sharing, common witness and common action by the churches and their members. More specifically, however, it is a renewal movement in and through the churches which has found expression in diverse initiatives and networks among lay people, especially women and youth. It is committed to the search for visible unity, not as an end in itself but in order to give credible witness “so that the world may believe” and to serve the healing of the human community and the wholeness of God’s entire creation.
- ✠ ^{2.8.5}While the ecumenical movement has a worldwide scope—in line with the original use of the word *oikoumene* for “the whole inhabited earth—it points more specifically to the catholicity of the church, that is, globally. In each place and in all places, the ecumenical movement is concerned with the true being and life of the church as an inclusive community.

^{2.9}The emergence over the last decades of transnational and increasingly worldwide structures of communication, finance and economy has created a particular kind of global unity. It is evident that the cost of this has been growing fragmentation of societies and exclusion for more and more of the human family. In their own international relationships the churches are under pressure to adapt themselves to this system and to accept its values, which tend to overlook if not deny the spiritual dimension of human life. This therefore constitutes a serious threat to the integrity of the ecumenical movement, whose organizational forms represent a distinctly different model of relationships, based on solidarity and sharing, mutual accountability and empowerment. On the threshold of the 21st century, all existing ecumenical structures must reassess themselves in the light of the challenge to manifest a form and quality of global community characterized by inclusiveness and reconciliation.

^{2.10}An important affirmation made in the early phase of collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches was that the two share in “one and the same ecumenical movement”. This oneness of the ecumenical movement does not imply that there is a single structure or a single centre among the many different expressions of the movement. Nor does it suggest a norma-

tive understanding which would become exclusive and thus contradict the very meaning of ecumenical in the sense of “wholeness”. The oneness of the ecumenical movement refers fundamentally to its orientation towards a “common calling”. Ultimately this is assured by the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the manifold manifestations of the movement.

^{2.11}The World Council of Churches shares with many other partners, institutionalized or not, the legacy of this one ecumenical movement and the responsibility to keep it alive. As the most comprehensive and representative body among the many organized expressions of the ecumenical movement, the World Council has the specific role of addressing the global ecumenical issues and acting as a trustee for the inner coherence of the movement.

Chapter 3

The Self-Understanding of the World Council of Churches

^{3.1}Any discussion of the WCC’s self-understanding must begin with the constitutional Basis on which the WCC is founded, with which all member churches express agreement:

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Two aspects of this statement are of central importance for articulating a renewed common understanding of the WCC: (1) its characterization of the Council as a “fellowship of churches”; and (2) its emphasis on the “common calling” which the churches seek to fulfil in and through the Council.

A fellowship of churches

^{3.2}The description of the WCC as a “fellowship of churches” indicates clearly that the Council is not itself a church and—as the Toronto statement categorically declares—must never become a “superchurch”. Moreover, since the churches within this fellowship themselves maintain different conceptions of the church, their understanding of the significance of this fellowship will also differ. This diversity was present at the WCC’s First Assembly in 1948 and at the meeting in 1950 of the WCC’s Central Committee in Toronto, which produced the Council’s fullest statement of self-definition. It continues to exist after fifty years; indeed, further understandings have emerged as a result of life together. Nevertheless, the use of the term “fellowship” in the Basis does suggest that the Council is more than a mere functional association of churches set up to organize activities in areas of common interest.

^{3.3}While “fellowship” is sometimes used to translate the Greek word *koinonia*, which is a key concept in recent ecumenical discussion about the church and its unity, the relationship among the churches in the WCC as a whole is not yet *koinonia* in the full sense (as described, for example, in the Canberra Assembly statement on “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling”). But the WCC Constitution (Art. 3,1) does portray the Council as a community of churches on the way to the “goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, [seeking] to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe”. To the extent that the member churches share the one baptism and the confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, it can even be said (using the words of the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council) that a “real, even though imperfect communion” exists between them already now.

^{3.4}The existence of the World Council of Churches as a fellowship of churches thus poses to its member churches what the Ecumenical Patriarchate has called an “ecclesiological challenge”: to clarify the meaning and the extent of the fellowship they experience in the Council, as well as the ecclesiological significance of *koinonia*, which is the purpose and aim of the WCC but not yet a given reality.

^{3.5}The following affirmations may contribute to such a clarification:

- ✘ ^{3.5.1}The mutual commitment which the churches have established with one another through the WCC is rooted in the recognition that they are related to one another thanks to actions of God in Jesus Christ which are prior to any decisions they may make. As the message from the Amsterdam Assembly put it, “Christ has made us his own, and he is not divided”.
- ✘ ^{3.5.2}The essence of the Council is the relationship of the churches to one another. The Council is the fellowship of churches on the way towards full *koinonia*. It has a structure and organization in order to serve as an instrument for the churches as they work towards *koinonia* in faith, life and witness; but the WCC is not to be identified with this structure, nor can it serve the churches effectively apart from the constant renewal of their own ecumenical vision and commitment.
- ✘ ^{3.5.3}This fellowship in the Council is not something abstract and static, nor is it limited to official contacts between institutional church bodies and their leaders or representatives. It is rather a dynamic, relational reality which embraces the fullness of the churches as manifestations of the people of God. It is not an end in itself, but exists to serve as a sign and instrument of God’s mission and activity in the world. The WCC may therefore be described as a missionary, diaconal and moral community of churches

✘ ^{3.5.4}While membership in the Council does not oblige churches to understand the phrase “fellowship of churches” in a particular way, it does commit them to dialogue about this. The WCC provides a space in which the churches can explore what it means to be in fellowship together towards greater unity in Christ. It also has the task of calling the churches beyond themselves to a fuller manifestation of that unity.

✘ ^{3.5.5}The churches within the fellowship of the WCC recognize that the other members belong to Christ, that membership in the church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own church and that the others possess at the very least “elements of the true church” (Toronto). Thus every member church is treated as an equally valued participant in the life of the WCC, for what it brings to this fellowship is a function not of its size and resources but of its being in Christ.

✘ ^{3.5.6}By their mutual engagement in the Council the churches open themselves to be challenged by one another to deeper, more costly ecumenical commitment. This *mutual accountability* takes many forms: recognizing their solidarity with each other, assisting each other in cases of need, refraining from actions incompatible with brotherly and sisterly relations, entering into spiritual relationships to learn from each other, consulting with each other “to learn of the Lord Jesus Christ what witness he would have them to bear to the world in his name” (Toronto).

^{3.6}While membership of the WCC is by no means the only way for churches to work together ecumenically on an international level, it is a significant acknowledgment of a church’s willingness to identify itself in a visible, sustained and organized way with the goals of the ecumenical movement and the search for deeper fellowship. Membership is therefore not just a one-time affiliation which then allows the churches to live comfortably with their continued separation.

^{3.7}As the understanding of the fellowship within the Council has broadened through the churches’ life together, so too has the understanding of what is implied by membership in this body.

✘ ^{3.7.1}To be a member means nurturing the ability to pray, live, act and grow together in community—sometimes through struggle and conflict—with churches from differing backgrounds and traditions. It implies the willingness and capacity to deal with disagreement through theological discussion, prayer and dialogue, treating contentious issues as matters for common theological discernment rather than political victory.

✘ ^{3.7.2}To be a member means helping one another to be faithful to the gospel, and questioning one another if any member is perceived to move away from the fundamentals of the faith or obedience to the gospel.

The integrity of the fellowship is preserved through the exercise of responsibility for one another in the spirit of common faithfulness to the gospel, rather than by judgment and exclusion.

✘ ^{3.7.3}To be a member means participating in ministries that extend beyond the boundaries and possibilities of any single church and being ready to link one’s own specific local context with the global reality and to allow that global reality to have an impact in one’s local situation.

✘ ^{3.7.4}To be a member means being part of a fellowship that has a voice of its own. While the churches are free to choose whether or not to identify themselves with the voice of the WCC when it speaks, they are committed to giving serious consideration to what the Council says or does on behalf of the fellowship as a whole.

✘ ^{3.7.5}To be a member means making a commitment to seek to implement within the life and witness of one’s own church the agreements reached through joint theological study and reflection by the total fellowship.

✘ ^{3.7.6}To be a member means participating in a fellowship of sharing and solidarity, supporting other members in their needs and struggles, celebrating with them their joys and hopes.

✘ ^{3.7.7}To be a member means understanding the mission of the church as a joint responsibility shared with others, rather than engaging in missionary or evangelistic activities in isolation from each other, much less in competition with or proselytism of other Christian believers.

✘ ^{3.7.8}To be a member means entering into a fellowship of worship and prayer with the other churches, nurturing concrete opportunities for shared worship and prayer while respecting the limitations imposed by specific traditions.

✘ ^{3.7.9}To be a member means taking a full part in the life and work of the WCC and its activities, including praying for the Council and all its member churches, being represented at Assemblies, making regular financial contributions to its work according to one’s possibilities and sharing the WCC’s concerns with local parishes, congregations and worshipping communities.

A common calling

^{3.8}Through the World Council of Churches the member churches seek to fulfil together a “common calling”. This phrase, which was added to the WCC Basis by the New Delhi Assembly in 1961, made explicit a dynamic understanding of the Council as a fellowship of pilgrims moving together towards the same goal—an understanding articulated already in its original (1938) Constitution, which said that “the

World Council shall offer counsel and provide opportunity for united action in matters of common interest” (Art. 4).

^{3.9}Amidst a variety of historical circumstances and in many different ways, the member churches have sought to live out this “common calling” over the past fifty years. Their witness has been neither perfect nor consistent. They have not always acted together when they might have. Yet by God’s grace they have been empowered to set up some signs of obedience and faithfulness by

- ✘ ^{3.9.1}building and maintaining fragile links of communication when they have found themselves on opposite sides of wars, hot and cold;
- ✘ ^{3.9.2}offering service in the name of Christ to millions driven from their homes and helping to rebuild societies shattered by violence, thus learning new forms of mutual sharing;
- ✘ ^{3.9.3}challenging each other to let go of historic bonds of dependence and dominance and forging new kinds of partnerships;
- ✘ ^{3.9.4}offering common witness to Jesus Christ in places where a single voice would not have been heard or taken seriously;
- ✘ ^{3.9.5}listening to and learning from the insights of others into those central understandings of doctrine and life over which they are divided, persisting stubbornly in the hope of seeing the day when unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship will be made visible;
- ✘ ^{3.9.6}offering pastoral support in many places where human dignity has been trampled, and joining their voices with others to defend in international forums the rights of those oppressed and pushed to the edges;
- ✘ ^{3.9.7}expressing solidarity in prayer and encouragement with those churches suffering persecution or seeking God’s will amidst situations of crisis;
- ✘ ^{3.9.8}refusing to turn away from the judgment that every form of racism, also in their own life, is contrary to the word and will of God;
- ✘ ^{3.9.9}committing themselves to solidarity with women, challenging structures that reinforce sexism and insisting on justice and full participation for women in church and world;
- ✘ ^{3.9.10}seeking to make their own communities and the instruments of their fellowship together more fully inclusive of women, youth, persons with disabilities and all others threatened with exclusion;
- ✘ ^{3.9.11}joining in intercessions and praise using each other’s words and music, and learning how to read the scripture through each other’s eyes.

^{3.10}The elements of this common calling have been summarized in the delineation of “functions and purposes” now

found in Article 3 of the WCC’s Constitution. The present formulation is that adopted by the Nairobi Assembly in 1975:

- ✘ to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe;
- ✘ to facilitate the common witness of the churches in each place and in all places;
- ✘ to support the churches in their worldwide missionary and evangelistic task
- ✘ to express the common concern of the churches in the service of human need, the breaking down of barriers between people, and the promotion of one human family in justice and peace;
- ✘ to foster the renewal of the churches in unity, worship, mission and service;
- ✘ to establish and maintain relations with national councils and regional conferences of churches, world confessional bodies and other ecumenical organizations;
- ✘ to carry on the work of the world movements for Faith and Order and Life and Work and of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Christian Education.

^{3.11}Such a listing can offer no more than an outline of central tasks expressed in general terms. It is through the churches’ continuing fellowship in the WCC that these “functions and purposes” take life in specific activities. In this process, new challenges to the life and mission of the churches highlight new dimensions of the ecumenical calling. Therefore, it is valuable for the member churches periodically to articulate anew the elements of their common calling, both as a reflection of the dynamic nature of their fellowship in the WCC and as an opportunity to recommit themselves to the ecumenical vision. The 50th anniversary of the founding of the WCC and the dawning of a new century and a new millennium make the Eighth Assembly a fitting moment for doing so.

^{3.12}An articulation of the Council’s purposes and functions on the occasion of its 50th anniversary should both express continuity with what has gone before and acknowledge the new challenges of the present day. Such a formulation should:

- ✘ ^{3.12.1}recognize the essential identity of the WCC as a fellowship of churches which 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;
- ✘ ^{3.12.2}enumerate the most important areas of concern in which the churches through the Council pursue this primary purpose;
- ✘ ^{3.12.3}make clear that the Council as a fellowship of churches is an organization through which its members

act together, not a body which acts separately from the churches;

- ✘ 3.12.4 recognize facets of the ecumenical vocation which have taken on a higher profile in recent years, including concerns for upholding the integrity of creation, relating to people of other faiths and promoting processes of education which enable Christians to think and act ecumenically;
- ✘ 3.12.5 emphasize the Council's vocation of strengthening the one ecumenical movement, not only through official organizational ties but also by way of supporting other ecumenical initiatives, creating networks among ecumenical organizations and groups, reaching out to all churches which share the ecumenical vision and working for the coherence of the many different manifestations of the ecumenical movement.

The Council as an organization

^{3.13}As a fellowship of churches and an instrument for strengthening the ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches has an institutional profile. This profile has many components, including the work the Council does, the events it organizes, the statements it makes, the images it projects. But the WCC as an institution must not be paralyzed by *institutionalism*, for its vocation in the service of the churches and the ecumenical movement requires that it be a living organism, responding to new challenges brought by changing times, new ecumenical partners and growing discernment of the ecumenical calling.

^{3.14}Structures are the means by which the Council seeks at a given moment of its life to manifest effectively its reality as a fellowship of churches. They constitute the basic shape of the Council, the framework for particular working arrangements. Changes in this framework neither replace the insights nor deny the values of what has gone before, but rather reflect a continuing dialogue of understandings and visions.

^{3.15}The structures for governing the Council are set forth in its Constitution. They establish the basic institutional shape of the WCC. These governing structures are mechanisms to ensure that the activities undertaken by the Council's internal institutional structure are attuned to the vision and needs and concerns of its member churches and ecumenical partners. In the way they are constituted and in the way they function, they should:

- ✘ 3.15.1 ensure maximum representation, participation and transparency in policy- and decision-making and avoid concentrating this power and responsibility in a small group;
- ✘ 3.15.2 give priority to reflection and deliberation on the key issues facing the churches in the world, rather than being dominated by organizational and programmatic decision-making;

- ✘ 3.15.3 provide a setting and process in which the voices of all can be truly heard, rather than one which privileges those whose culture, language, education or experience make it easier for them to speak out;
- ✘ 3.15.4 give continued attention to the coherence and coordination of the WCC's activities and their theological basis, rather than serving as a forum for advocating particular interests and agendas in isolation (and thus maintaining familiar dichotomies between "church unity concerns" and "social justice concerns", "ecclesiology" and "ethics", the "pastoral task" and the "prophetic task", "mission" and "dialogue", "relationships" and "programmes");
- ✘ 3.15.5 stimulate and engage those with policy-making and leadership responsibilities in the member churches to take up the concerns of the fellowship of churches and to act ecumenically in their local contexts, rather than perpetuating an impression of the WCC and the ecumenical movement as something apart from and outside of the churches;
- ✘ 3.15.6 allow for the establishment and deepening of relations with churches which are open to ecumenical fellowship but do not now find membership in the Council ecclesologically possible or congenial;
- ✘ 3.15.7 therefore make visible a foreshadowing of the full *koinonia* which the churches seek through the ecumenical movement.

^{3.16}The internal structure of the WCC, set forth in its rules, regulations and bylaws and the decisions of its governing bodies, is a mechanism for organizing effectively the day-to-day work undertaken by the staff to carry out the decisions and policies made by the governing bodies. This structure should:

- ✘ 3.16.1 manifest the identity of the WCC as a fellowship of churches which have come together in this body on a trinitarian theological basis; this implies both working in an integrated manner on the full scope of the common calling to unity and making evident how all the Council's activities are grounded in the hope that God's purposes, revealed in Jesus Christ and activated in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, will not fail;
- ✘ 3.16.2 aim at enhancing the fellowship among the member churches, not at building up or maintaining an organization for its own sake;
- ✘ 3.16.3 acknowledge the plurality of cultures and theological and spiritual traditions represented in the member churches and manifest a commitment to being a truly inclusive community;
- ✘ 3.16.4 recognize that the Council's unique identity and experience as a fellowship which is both worldwide and open to churches of all Christian traditions equip it to undertake certain specific elements of the ecumenical vocation:

- ✘ playing an animating and coordinating role in efforts for the coherence of the one ecumenical movement;
- ✘ serving as a mediator among parties in conflict or as advocate for groups who are unable to speak for themselves;
- ✘ being a seed-bed of ideas and a source of analysis, drawing on the breadth of experience of its member churches to help them to grow together in their ecumenical awareness and to arrive at new understandings of reality;
- ✘ demonstrating the intimate relations between the local and the global, in the recognition that local issues often have global implications and that global dilemmas are often most pressing in their local manifestations;
- ✘ speaking the prophetic word which from its global perspective addresses the urgent issues of the day;
- ✘ ^{3.16.5}ensure that responsibility for ecumenical activities is lodged as near as is feasible to the point of application, in partnership with groups of member churches and other ecumenical organizations;
- ✘ ^{3.16.6}enable the Council to adapt its work and working style as necessary to meet the rapidly changing conditions of the world and the diverse needs of the churches in a focused, effective and economically sustainable manner;
- ✘ ^{3.16.7}provide for regular planning, review and assessment of all activities.

Chapter 4

Relationships with Partners in the Ecumenical Movement, Churches Outside of WCC Membership, and Other Bodies

^{4.1}Whenever people are drawn together in the name of Jesus Christ, it is the work of the Holy Spirit. This means that all efforts aimed at promoting the unity of the church and all initiatives in which Christians seek to participate in God's healing of creation are fundamentally related.

Councils and conferences of churches

^{4.2}The relationship between the WCC and *regional, national and local councils (conferences) of churches or Christian councils (conferences)* is crucial for the vitality and coherence of the ecumenical movement. These latter bodies differ from one another in their constitutional basis and their composition. While most, like the WCC, are constituted by churches as members, some also include other Christian organizations (e.g. Bible societies, the YMCA and YWCA). Several of the Regional Ecumenical Organizations (REOs) include National Councils of Churches and National Christian Councils (NCCs) as full members. Nevertheless, despite these differ-

ences, all such ecumenical bodies share the same basic purpose.

^{4.3}All councils are independent bodies whatever the structural links between them. The Constitution and Rules of the WCC acknowledge that such bodies at the regional and national levels are essential partners in the ecumenical enterprise. National councils, in particular, can be recognized as being in association with the WCC. In addition, the member organizations of the Conference for World Mission and Evangelism have a structural link with the WCC through this Conference. The evolution and interrelatedness of the ecumenical agenda call for the establishment of more structured relationships and better coordination of activities among the councils on all levels.

^{4.4}Because local, national, regional and world councils of churches are all expressions of the one ecumenical movement, their relationships should be characterized by a conciliar spirit of mutuality and cooperation, rather than competition and the demarcation of areas of influence. The worldwide ecumenical movement and its organizational expressions form a network with many centres of activity, not an hierarchical structure with superimposed levels of authority. As part of this network, the WCC has an essential and distinctive role as "the unique place where churches can gather ecumenically on a global level to share in dialogue and common action. The Council demonstrates visibly the global interaction of Christians and makes it possible for the whole church to stand beside Christians in crisis situations" (Central Committee, 1989). In this age of fragmentation, the WCC's task of global witness and coordination may take on greater significance. But this is not a "superior" role. All councils, in so far as they serve the ecumenical vision of wholeness and healing, are gifts of the same Spirit and expressions of the same fellowship in Christ.

^{4.5}In 1992 the WCC Central Committee accepted a set of "Guiding Principles for Relationships and Cooperation between Regional Ecumenical Organizations and the World Council of Churches". They define the relationship as one of "partnership based on their common faith and commitment", characterized by complementarity, mutual trust and reciprocity. While much progress has been achieved in information-sharing, mutual consultation and programmatic collaboration, the magnitude of the common tasks and challenges to be faced with severely limited resources suggests the need to establish more intentional structural links to enable common planning and decision-making as well as an effective division of labour. Both the WCC and the REOs recognize the NCCs as essential partners in their work, mediating and coordinating relationships with the member churches in a given country; and this should be recognized in any effort to develop a comprehensive framework linking the different councils and conferences of churches in the one ecumenical movement.

^{4.6}The ecumenical movement is both universal and local. The oneness of the ecumenical movement worldwide should be evident in each local, national or regional council of churches, just as the WCC must remain firmly in touch with the reality of local communities where Christians are gathered to worship and serve.

Other ecumenical bodies

^{4.7}In addition to its relations with councils of churches of differing geographical scope, the WCC is in relationship with a variety of other ecumenical bodies.

^{4.8}An important relationship is that between the WCC and the diverse bodies known generally as *Christian World Communions*. Again, these relationships should be marked by mutual accountability and reciprocity, and the Council should seek ways to share tasks and resources with these partners in the ecumenical movement. Such sharing is particularly important for those bodies which understand themselves as one worldwide communion of churches and of which most if not all members are also member churches of the WCC. Ways should be found to associate such bodies more directly with the organized life of the WCC. A strong relationship between the WCC and these bodies can be enriching for both, strengthening the sense of the latter that they are part of the worldwide fellowship of Christians and reminding the churches in the World Council that ecumenical commitment can be nourished by rootedness in an ecclesial tradition.

^{4.9}The WCC is constituted as a council of churches. This is a central statement of its identity. However, the constitutional documents of the WCC recognize that the Council must maintain working relationships with a wide variety of *international ecumenical organizations*, some of which are older than the WCC itself. These include organizations representing particular constituencies—such as youth, students, women, lay people—and bodies and agencies with a particular functional purpose or ministry in such fields as education, communication, resource sharing and development. As organizations with an international scope and mandate, most of them understand themselves as carrying out a specialized ministry in response to the same ecumenical calling as the member churches of the WCC. Strengthening the partnership with these organizations will be of vital importance for the WCC in the effort to maintain the coherence of the ecumenical movement.

^{4.10}The dynamic of the ecumenical movement over the past decade has given rise to various *Christian communities and movements*. Most have a flexible organizational structure as part of the wider network of social or popular movements, but they have become important partners of the WCC in service, especially in working for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Many of these movements have been prophetic within and beyond the churches and have opened up new ways of Christian witness in the wider community. The WCC should continue to offer itself as a forum where such com-

munities or movements whose objectives and activities are in harmony with the Basis, purpose and functions of the WCC can meet and cooperate.

Churches which are not members of the WCC

^{4.11}The *Roman Catholic Church* has been, since the Second Vatican Council, an active participant in the ecumenical movement and a valued partner in numerous ways with the WCC (especially through the Joint Working Group and participation in the Commission on Faith and Order). The member churches of the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church are inspired by the same vision of God's plan to unite all things in Christ. It is inconceivable that either the WCC or the Roman Catholic Church could pursue its ecumenical calling without the collaboration of the other; and it is to be hoped that both will find ways to deepen and expand this relationship, particularly since the Roman Catholic Church has in recent years become part of a growing number of local, national and regional ecumenical bodies of which WCC member churches are also part. While membership in the WCC is by no means the only way for the churches to work together on a worldwide level, some member churches of the WCC which maintain bilateral relations with the Roman Catholic Church believe that the fellowship of the WCC is impoverished by the absence of the Roman Catholic Church from this circle of churches.

^{4.12}The fellowship of the WCC is limited by the absence of other churches which, for various reasons, have not sought membership. For example, unjustifiable barriers have arisen between the WCC and some *Evangelical and Pentecostal churches* because of tendencies on both sides to caricature or remain indifferent to each other. Some of these barriers have begun to break down through the development of ongoing contacts between the WCC and other bodies, such as the World Evangelical Fellowship. These efforts should be sustained by the search for new forms of relationships at all levels between WCC member churches, other churches and other ecumenical organizations.

Other organizations and groups

^{4.13}The inseparable connection between work for the unity of the church and work for the healing and wholeness of all creation will often bring the Council into dialogue and collaboration with persons, groups and organizations that are not identified by a specific Christian purpose or commitment. This includes in particular representative organizations of other faith communities or inter-religious bodies. While in these cases a structural relationship would be not be possible or appropriate, they are indispensable partners for the WCC in its effort to foster dialogue and cooperation with people of other faiths in order to build viable human communities.

^{4.14}Mention must also be made of the large number of international non-governmental organizations and other groupings of civil society at the national and international levels, as well as governmental and inter-governmental institutions,

particularly the United Nations and its various specialized agencies (with which the Council has long maintained consultative status). The challenges of globalization and the search for an international order of justice and peace necessitate close contacts between the WCC and such organizations.

Discussion Guide

Session One

Material to be covered

In this session, we'll reflect on and discuss chapter 1—"Introduction" of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches* and also some key Johannine texts often cited as biblical foundations for the ecumenical vision.

Needed for this session

Participants will need this discussion resource and a Bible. It will be helpful if the agenda for the meeting has encouraged participants to read and reflect on the material ahead of the meeting.

The discussion

Begin by looking at chapter 1—"Introduction" of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches*. Discuss some or all of the following:

1. The Pennsylvania Council of Churches has been around a lot longer than the World Council of Churches (though some of the predecessor bodies of the WCC predate our Council). We, too, have seen a lot of changes in our context. What are some of the most important changes that have occurred in the last 50 years or so, both in the churches and in Pennsylvania? How has the Pennsylvania Council of Churches changed in response to these changes in context? (Those of us with longer experience in the Council might briefly share anecdotes illustrating some of these changes.)
2. Paragraph 1.12 lists five declarations of what the WCC is not, together with eight positive assumptions which underlie life in the WCC. Looking first at the "is not" list, is the Pennsylvania Council of Churches now, or has it ever been, in danger of contradicting any of these "is not" statements? (For example, has the Council ever tried to become, in your estimation, a superchurch?)

Now, look at the positive assumptions. Which of these can you affirm *personally*? Which of these do you believe your *communion* could affirm? Which can't you affirm personally? Why not? Which do you believe your communion cannot affirm? Why not?

3. Finally, paragraph 1.13 points to some extraordinary changes in the WCC—the shift from a christocentric to a trinitarian basis for the WCC and the first formal statement on the church's unity.
 - a. Does it matter to you (or your communion) if the Pennsylvania Council of Churches is explicitly trinitarian?
 - b. The complete New Delhi declaration on the nature of unity reads:

"We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into a fully committed fellowship holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people."¹

This complex sentence contains both a definition of unity and a definition of "fully committed fellowship." List the components (or marks) of both unity and fellowship, as defined by New Delhi.

- a. Which marks can you affirm, both personally and on behalf of your communion? Which can't you affirm (either personally or on behalf of your communion)? Why?
- b. What are some of the barriers *today*, within the church bodies that make up the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, to living out the "fully committed fellowship" as defined by New Delhi?

Now, let us turn our attention to some passages from the Fourth Gospel.

1. Read John 10:11–18 (perhaps from several different translations).
 - a. Who are "the other sheep that do not belong to this fold?"
 - b. How might we appropriate the "one flock, one shepherd" imagery in the life of the Council? To further the vision of Christian unity among all the churches of the Commonwealth (especially non-member church bodies)?

2. Read John 17 (if time is limited, focus especially on vv. 20–24).
 - a. This text “...has been used frequently in ecumenical discussions with the presumption that it refers to *church* unity. For Roman Catholics, in particular, ‘That they all may be one’ is *the* ecumenical slogan.”²

Before moving to test that presumption, look at the chapter as a whole. Brown suggests³ that the organization of the “priestly prayer” is suggested by Jesus’ indications of whom he is praying for: his own glorification in v. 1, the disciples in v. 9, and those who will believe through the preaching of the disciples in v. 20. If one accepts that premise, one has three sections to the prayer: vv. 1–8, vv. 9–19, and vv. 20–26. Look at each section; what common elements can you identify in each section?
 - b. Now focus on the third section, vv. 20–26. Assume, at least for the moment, that the presumption that the unity of the prayer refers to church unity. What characterizes this unity? What is its source?
 - c. V. 21 links unity and evangelism (“that they all may be one...so that the world may believe”). Share anecdotes (if you have any) about when manifest Christian *dis*-unity impeded (or appeared to impede) evangelism. Is manifest disunity (as it is often asserted to be) a barrier to the effective carrying out of the church’s mission?
 - d. Finally, the critical reflection: *If* this unity is church unity (and if a central characteristic is its organic nature), does our current ecumenical fixation with “full communion” and “reconciled diversity” measure up to that for which Jesus prayed? Why or why not?

Session Two

Material to be covered

In this session, we’ll reflect on and discuss chapter 2—“The Ecumenical Movement” of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches* and 1 Corinthians 12.

Needed for this session

Participants will need this discussion resource and a Bible. It will be helpful if the agenda for the meeting has encouraged participants to read and reflect on the material ahead of the meeting.

The discussion

Begin by looking at chapter 2—“The Ecumenical Movement” of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches*. Discuss some or all of the following:

1. Paragraph 2.1 acknowledges that the roots of the World Council of Churches are in the “ecumenical movement” and implies that the ecumenical movement is greater than the WCC. The ecumenical movement in Pennsylvania is greater than the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, too. What other dimensions of the ecumenical movement can you identify in Pennsylvania?
2. Paragraphs 2.2–2.7 discuss the ambiguity around the meaning of “ecumenical movement” and “ecumenical.”
 - a. Go around the table, with each person offering her or his definition of “ecumenical.” What do your individual definitions have in common? Where do they differ?
 - b. Paragraph 2.5 acknowledges the tension between those who focus on the ecclesial dimension of ecumenism (“commitment to the unity and renewal of the church”) and the social dimension of ecumenism (“reconciliation of God’s world”). Consider those as endpoints on a continuum:

Ecclesial _____ Social

Where do you place your commitment on that continuum? Where does the team/committee fall on the continuum? Where do you think the Council as a whole falls?
 - c. What would be gained, and what would be lost were the understanding of ecumenism we used in the Pennsylvania Council of Churches to be that of “macro-ecumenism” (see paragraph 2.6)?
3. The last section of this chapter (paragraphs 2.8–2.11) offers “some basic distinctions and marks of identification.” Take a couple of minutes to carefully parse these points.
 - a. Paragraph 2.8.1—note the tension between things as they are, things as they should be (the churches’ “calling”), and things as they are thanks to God’s gift (i.e., an expression of proleptic eschatology; see 2 Corinthians 5:16–19).
 - b. Paragraph 2.8.2—Note the careful and far-reaching understanding of the ecumenical vision.
 - c. Paragraph 2.8.3—What does it mean to affirm both that the ecumenical movement is “rooted in the life of the Christian churches” and that “it is not limited to the concern for inter-church relationships?”
 - d. Paragraph 2.8.4—Note the importance of churches and, especially, of laity (especially youth and women). Predecessor bodies of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches were lay movements; the World Student Christian Federation is a continuing example of a youth-led ecumenical expression. Note also the dual end of the search for visible unity.

- e. Paragraph 2.8.5—*Oikoumene* implies inclusivity (or so this paragraph seems to argue). Are there limits to the church’s being an inclusive community?
- f. Paragraph 2.9 contrasts the values of globalized market capitalism with the values of the ecumenical movement (“solidarity and sharing, mutual accountability and empowerment” and “inclusiveness and reconciliation”). In your experience, is the ecumenical movement counter-cultural, offering an alternative vision for human society? And, what are the implications of that insight for the Pennsylvania Council of Churches and its witness in Pennsylvania?
- g. Paragraph 2.10 insists on the essential unity of the ecumenical movement and the diversity of its expression—a sort of “let a thousand flowers bloom” attitude that suggests progress toward the incarnation of the ecumenical vision comes about through messy, uncoordinated, and often seemingly competing efforts by many groups and people. What are the implications of this paragraph for the way we understand the Pennsylvania Council of Churches?

Now, let us turn our attention to that well-known passage from 1 Corinthians.

1. This passage is frequently used to identify and honor the diverse giftedness of members of a congregation. Is it also legitimate to apply it to the ecumenical movement—that is, to see the various body parts as separate ecclesial expressions, each gifted by the Spirit, which together make up the one body? Why or why not? (See Ephesians 1:22–23 for another specific instance in which Paul uses the body metaphor for the church; there he specifically describes the church as Christ’s body.)
2. Assume it is legitimate to understand this passage as describing the differently-gifted, diverse, and yet unified church. Spend some time trying to name the particular gifts the Spirit has given each communion represented around the table.
3. Finally, attentive to v. 7, how might those diverse gifts be used “for the common good?”

Session Three

Material to be covered

In this session, we’ll reflect on and discuss chapter 3—“The Self-Understanding of the World Council of Churches” of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches* and part of chapter 2 of Ephesians.

Needed for this session

Participants will need this discussion resource, a Bible, and the copy of the Council’s Constitution and Bylaws (distributed to action team members at the January orientation and

planning day and to Governing Board members at the April 2004 meeting). It will be helpful if the agenda for the meeting has encouraged participants to read and reflect on the material ahead of the meeting.

The discussion

Begin by looking at chapter 3—“The Self-Understanding of the World Council of Churches” of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches*. This chapter discusses the two key phrases in the WCC’s “basis statement” (others might call it a mission or vision statement)—“fellowship of churches” and “their common calling.” We’ll look at these two phrases in the context of our own Council. Discuss some or all of the following:

1. Is the Pennsylvania Council of Churches “more than a mere functional association of churches set up to organize activities in areas of common interest?” (See paragraph 3.2.) Should it be? Why or why not?
2. Discuss in turn each of the affirmations of paragraph 3.5. How do our member church bodies, through the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, exhibit their assent to these affirmations? What specific things might the member church bodies do, through their presence in the Council, to make their assent to these affirmations more visible?
3. Look at the marks of membership listed in paragraph 3.7. Discussing each in turn, name specific ways each church body represented exhibits each mark of membership in the context of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. What specific, additional things might specific member church bodies do, in the context of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, to exhibit these marks of membership?
4. What is the “common calling” of the member church bodies of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches? How might that common calling be exhibited by those member church bodies through the Council? In other ways? (Be very specific and pragmatic in responding to these questions, as your responses will suggest new program directions and challenges.)
5. Turn to paragraphs 3.15 and 3.16. In light of the structural principles listed there, critique the structure and operation of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. (Refer to the Council’s own Constitution and Bylaws as needed.)

Now, let us turn our attention to Ephesians 2:11–22.

1. This passage, in its original social context, argues for the church as being radically inclusive. Who (if anyone) are the “aliens” and “strangers” who might be “far off” from the church today? Are there “commandments and ordinances” that we need to understand as abolished in order that God might again create a single, new humanity?
2. According to this passage, what are the essentials of the church? (More technically, what ecclesiological principles

make up the essential nature of the church, according to this passage?)

Session Four

Material to be covered

In this session, we'll reflect on and discuss chapter 4—"Relationships with Partners in the Ecumenical Movement, Churches Outside of WCC Membership, and Other Bodies" of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches* and Ephesians 4:1–16.

Needed for this session

Participants will need this discussion resource and a Bible. It will be helpful if the agenda for the meeting has encouraged participants to read and reflect on the material ahead of the meeting.

The discussion

Begin by looking at chapter 4—"Relationships with Partners in the Ecumenical Movement, Churches Outside of WCC Membership, and Other Bodies" of *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches*. Discuss some or all of the following:

1. What should the Pennsylvania Council of Churches do regarding local councils of churches (i.e., county and metropolitan councils) to ensure that our relationships with them are "characterized by a conciliar spirit of mutuality and cooperation, rather than competition and the demarcation of areas of influence?" (See paragraph 4.4.)
2. Is the Pennsylvania Council of Churches "impoverished by the absence of the Roman Catholic Church?" What concrete steps can you identify that the Council, *or its member church bodies*, might take to enhance relationships with the Roman Catholic Church in Pennsylvania? Is the Council itself a barrier to a more productive relationship?
3. Is the Pennsylvania Council of Churches also impoverished by the absence of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches? What concrete steps can you identify that the Council, *or its member church bodies*, might take to enhance relationships with Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Pennsylvania? Is the Council itself a barrier to more productive relationships? What other barriers can you identify that need to be overcome?
4. What other organizations, groups, and ecumenical bodies can you identify—either in Pennsylvania or elsewhere—with which the Pennsylvania Council of Churches should become connected in some way "for the healing and wholeness of all creation?" (See paragraphs 4.13–14.)

Now, let us turn our attention to Ephesians 4:1–16.

1. In the face of the strong emphasis on unity in vv. 4–6, how might one justify continued separation within the church?

2. Ephesians, in contrast to the seven "unquestionably authentic Pauline letters,"⁴ identifies Christ as the head of the church (see 2:22, 4:16; cf. Romans 12:4–5 and 1 Corinthians 12:11–12, where the church is described as the body of Christ). Do all the member church bodies of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches affirm Christ as the head of the church? What are the implications of such an affirmation for understanding the church in an ecumenical context?
3. What might Council member church bodies do "to speak the truth in love" to each other? Give some examples of messages that might be spoken in love which your own church body might need to hear from its ecumenical partners.
4. Not all member church bodies practice baptism, and there is substantial disagreement among those that do over the meaning and mode of baptism. In that light, how do we deal with the "one baptism" of v. 5?
5. So too there are substantive (and church-dividing) dogmatic and/or doctrinal disagreements, even among member church bodies. How do we deal with the "one faith" of v. 5?
6. Does v. 14 rule out any new understandings, teachings, or practices associated with the church and its expression of the Christian faith?

Finally, what other Bible passages regarding the church and the ecumenical vision would you suggest for study? Make a list and see that it is given to the Council's staff. Thank you!

¹ The text of the document in this study resource has been downloaded from www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/cuv-e.html and formatted appropriately.

² As quoted in Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (WCC/Eerdmans, 1997), 88. Subsequent paragraphs in the New Delhi document discuss the key marks identified in what Kinnamon and Cope call "one of the most famous—and longest!—sentences in ecumenical history."

³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii–xxi)* (Doubleday, 1970), 775.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 749–750.

⁵ See, e.g., *The Harper Collins Study Bible—New Revised Standard Version*, 2192.