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2 **Our Unfolding Journey with Jesus Christ:**
3 **Reflections on the Global Christian Forum Experience**
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5 *Since its beginnings, more than a decade and a half ago, the Global Christian Forum has*
6 *accumulated considerable practical wisdom. This document is a first attempt to articulate*
7 *theological (and especially ecclesiological) insights which have emerged from the*
8 *experiences of the Forum's distinctive life.*

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10 *This reflection is written in the recognition of the many different understandings, and*
11 *uses of language, among Forum participants. It acknowledges the affirmation (made at*
12 *the second Global Gathering in Manado in 2011) that there is no expectation of*
13 *'abandoning theological distinctives'. Further, it highlights that the primary purpose and*
14 *practices of the Forum are focused on extending and deepening relationships rather than*
15 *upon theological dialogues seeking to produce agreed texts. Mirroring the Forum's own*
16 *practices, this account is therefore doxological and testimonial, narrative and*
17 *descriptive, rather than theoretical or analytical.*

18 *Nonetheless, it is hoped that this reflection, produced through a process of broad*
19 *collaboration, will help to address questions of how to deepen theological clarity in*
20 *reflecting on the purpose and promise of the Forum, and will contribute to the ongoing*
21 *conversations through which these question emerged. Still, the best means of*
22 *appreciating the fullness of the GCF remains to 'come and see' (John 1:39).*

23 **1. The Journey of the Global Christian Forum**

24 **1.1. A Fresh Effort in Changing Circumstances**

25 We give praise and thanks to God the Father, who is always at work calling his people to
26 share in the life and mission of his Son, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy
27 Spirit. At the same time, we confess that the many separations and divisions among
28 Christians have often impeded the effective proclamation of the Gospel to the nations
29 (See John 17:21).

30 The Global Christian Forum (GCF) emerged as a new and fresh initiative in the late
31 twentieth century, responding to both the achievements and the limitations in the
32 historical quest for Christian unity. The twentieth century saw a number of significant
33 changes in global Christianity, among them the emergence of new expressions of the
34 Christian faith in the Global South, the growth of Christianity in China, an increasing
35 awareness of religious pluralism in every region of the world, the public re-emergence of
36 Christianity in former Communist countries, the continuing suffering of the church in
37 many diverse settings, and rising secularisation in western cultures. These developments
38 helped contribute to the need for an initiative that would enable the broadening and
39 deepening of relationships among brothers and sisters in Christ as well as among
40 churches who would have little if any encounter, or likelihood of encounter, with one
41 another. The GCF is such an initiative: it has provided a flexible process in which all

42 Christians and churches are invited to recognise in those from very different confessions,
43 traditions, cultures, or backgrounds the marks of living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

44 **1.2 Taking the First Steps**

45 The call for a new global initiative for Christian unity resounded in December 1998 at the
46 8th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Harare, Zimbabwe.

47 Acknowledging that the global Christian family extended far beyond the membership of
48 the WCC, the Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser, then the general secretary, envisioned some table,
49 some neutral space, some ‘forum’ which could facilitate a broader and deeper pattern of
50 relationships among all those who confess Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. The
51 Assembly encouraged pursuit of this vision through a process of broad consultation. Two
52 years later, a meeting of a wide spectrum of leaders of churches – Anglican, Catholic,
53 Evangelical, Orthodox, Pentecostal, classical Protestant – expressed the strong conviction
54 that the time was ripe for pursuing such a conversation among themselves.

55 Another defining moment occurred in June, 2002, at Fuller Theological Seminary, a
56 prominent Evangelical seminary in Pasadena (USA). Representatives of a wide range of
57 global Christianity gathered: African Instituted, Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Disciples,
58 Evangelical, Friends (Quakers), Holiness, Independent, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist,
59 Moravian, Old Catholic, Orthodox (Eastern and Oriental), Pentecostal, Reformed,
60 Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventist, United and Uniting Churches, together with
61 representatives from Evangelical and Pentecostal alliances, national and regional
62 ecumenical bodies, and parachurch organisations (including World Vision, the YWCA,
63 the YMCA and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students). The love for one
64 another that flowed from their recognition of Jesus Christ in each other led to full
65 agreement in the midst of their dramatic diversity on a declaration of common purpose
66 and faith. The new forum, they said, would be

67 an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches
68 and inter-church organisations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as
69 perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to
70 explore and address together common challenges.

71 This declaration remains to this day the foundational statement of purpose and faith of the
72 GCF.

73 A number of continental consultations, through which the vision and its practice were
74 tested and consolidated, prepared the way for the first GCF global assembly at Limuru,
75 Kenya, in November 2007. This gathered an unprecedented diversity of the world’s
76 Christian families, over 230 participants, at a high level of leadership, from all the main
77 Christian traditions in the world and their global bodies. Notable was the desire and
78 commitment to be part of this vital movement expressed by a wide range of leaders –
79 from the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Council of Churches, the Pentecostal
80 movement, African Instituted churches, global Christian world communions, Orthodox
81 churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

82 From its earliest days, the GCF has expressed its hope for Christian unity by inviting an
83 unparalleled range of leaders of Christian churches, communities and inter-church
84 organisations to come together. The Forum invites these representatives to gather in the
85 spirit of Jesus' prayer to the Father for his disciples – 'that they may all be one ... so that
86 the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:21) – and conscious of the wider
87 impact of relationships among Christians and Christian bodies described in John 13:35:
88 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'.
89 Participants come together because of faith in a reconciling God: 'All this is from God,
90 who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of
91 reconciliation ...' (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). The Forum process is conducted with the
92 expectation that, when those who participate come to recognise Christ in one another, and
93 one another in Christ, then there will also be recognition of the sharing of an unbreakable
94 bond which is not of our making, but God's (Philemon 1:6).

95 The GCF's particular concern is for those who have had little, if any encounter with one
96 another. When any of us are distanced from one another, all of us are diminished. 'The
97 eye cannot say to the hand "I have no need of you" nor again the head to the feet, "I have
98 no need of you"' (1 Corinthians 12:21). In response to the contemporary ecclesial
99 situation of fragmentation and to God's call, the GCF is always asking 'who is missing
100 from among us? Who still should be invited to gather?'

101 ***2. The Life of the Global Christian Forum: Encountering One Another in Christ***

102 The GCF invites representatives of churches and inter-church organizations to come
103 together, to meet one another, to discover their shared relationship to our Lord Jesus, and
104 to discern together their common challenges. This call comes in response to the need for
105 Christians to experience with one another the deep bonds of faith and fellowship
106 (*koinonia*) already shared as disciples of Christ.

107 The efforts of the GCF to initiate relationships and to promote their broadening and
108 deepening offer distinctive new ways of coming together, journeying together and
109 witnessing together. These are interwoven, rather than sequential. The primary purpose of
110 the Forum has always been to encourage new relationships among those who do not
111 otherwise meet one another. But, of course, the network of relationships is wonderfully
112 complex. Any meeting may offer a first encounter between representatives of certain
113 traditions present, or with wider regional or global perspectives; it may also bring
114 opportunities for a renewal of relationship or to take existing relationships into new areas.
115 This reflects the diversity in ecclesial traditions, personal experiences, and particular
116 cultural and socio-political contexts of those who meet. One example is that relationships
117 between particular traditions in one setting may be experienced quite differently
118 elsewhere.

119 ***2.1.A Distinctive Space for Encounter***

120 Among the various dynamics of the GCF, there is distinctiveness in both the way in
121 which the GCF offers invitations, and in the nature of the space in which participants
122 gather and encounter one another.

123 From the beginning there has been a GCF commitment that in its meetings about half of
124 the participants come from those Evangelical, Pentecostal, and other churches which have
125 not engaged in the ecumenical movement. The other half represent churches historically
126 engaged with the ecumenical movement

127 This space is primarily a ‘forum’. It is an open space, welcoming representatives of all
128 Christian communities which are able to ‘confess the triune God, and Jesus Christ as
129 perfect in His divinity and humanity.’ (*See the Guiding Purpose Statement in the sidebar*
130 *above.*) This affirmation indicates the scope of the space and its foundation-stone. At the
131 same time, within the Forum it is recognised and accepted that the way in which
132 participants affirm this truth may differ.

133 The Forum thus recognises that participants come from varied understandings and
134 practices of Christian life. Further, it is acknowledged that the word ‘church’ (or
135 ‘churches’) is used in many different ways.

136 Participants are therefore invited to engage one another in the challenges – and enriching
137 opportunities – of expanding their ways of understanding, speaking about, and
138 experiencing ecclesial life. They are invited to speak from the integrity of their own
139 perspectives, traditions and experiences. Everyone is to listen respectfully and openly to
140 accounts of the living Word of God at work in the people of God, which may be
141 expressed in ways different to those in which they are accustomed to speaking about their
142 faith.

143 We gather in the name of Jesus Christ. This Christological affirmation underlies and
144 shapes our encounters together. We come with the desire and hope that, by the Holy
145 Spirit at work among us, we may grow in experiencing others as members of the body of
146 Christ. The Forum has proved itself to be a fruitful space for recognising one other as
147 ‘belonging to the Way’ (Acts 9:2). It is a challenge both to receive one another, and to be
148 ready to receive from one another. In this experience there is a two-fold dynamic at work:
149 we may come to recognise Christ in those whom we had not previously known as
150 brothers and sisters in Christ. We also may be challenged to live in these relationships in
151 new and deeper ways, with all the implications this may have for our own discipleship,
152 both personal and in communities.

153 Within the Forum participants share in a time and place of openness to the transformative
154 action of the Holy Spirit who calls Christians to ever greater faithfulness to Jesus Christ,
155 individually and together. The life of faith requires constant readiness to turn (*metanoia*)
156 to the action of the Holy Spirit at work in places and peoples beyond our own traditions
157 and experiences, and to be called forward into newness of life by our Lord who
158 repeatedly says ‘follow me’ (John 21:19).

159 Through maintaining openness to new participants, and to the work of the Holy Spirit
160 among the followers of Jesus Christ, the Forum similarly remains open to new and on-
161 going shaping. Those who participate in a GCF event share in ownership of this space,
162 and join in the development of the Forum’s life, for ‘to each is given the manifestation of
163 the Spirit for the common good’ (1 Corinthians 12:7).

164 To respond to an invitation to the Forum is to accept the element of risk that is entailed in
165 preparedness to move beyond known ecclesial experiences. Participants can expect to
166 find that their preconceived notions, both about themselves and their own experiences, as
167 well as about how they view others, may be challenged by the Lord who ‘has broken
168 down the dividing wall ... the hostility between us’. In this way participants no longer
169 find themselves ‘strangers and aliens’ to one another but recognise each other as ‘citizens
170 with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundations of
171 the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.’ Participation is
172 also understood to entail openness to an enrichment of Christian relationship, for in
173 Christ ‘the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in
174 whom [we] also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God’ (Ephesians
175 2:14-22).

176 Importantly, the GCF is not a church, a council of churches, or an organisation with
177 membership; and it is not intended to replace churches, ecclesial bodies or networks. Its
178 aim is to complement the work of the churches in the promotion of Christian unity. The
179 GCF responds to the isolation, estrangement and brokenness within the body of Christ in
180 today’s world.

181 The GCF is committed to working with local churches and ecclesial bodies (including at
182 national, sub-regional, or regional levels) in the organisation of meetings and other
183 events. The intention is, as appropriate, first, to establish new relationships, and also to
184 encourage existing relationships and to support their broadening and deepening, with the
185 hope that the experience of the Forum will then enrich their further development in
186 response to the Spirit’s leading. The GCF is blessed by the welcome and witness it
187 receives, and has been profoundly enhanced in its continuing journey.

188 The Forum has intentionally sought to retain a movement-like character, as light and
189 flexible as possible in its staffing and structures, and to work with minimal institutional
190 burden. From the beginning, the GCF has understood its existence to be provisional. It
191 prays and works for the day when its service will no longer be necessary.

192 ***2.2. A Set of Practices and Processes for the Journey Together***

193 The most important practice in the development of the GCF and in its meetings is the
194 telling of faith stories.

195 It was discovered that this approach enabled the full participation of those Christian
196 communities in which sharing testimonies occurs regularly, including notably
197 Pentecostal, Evangelical and African Instituted churches whose experience the GCF has
198 sought especially to include. In these communities, the stories are a means to spread the
199 Gospel, seeking through one’s own story of conversion and God’s continuing faithfulness
200 to encourage and strengthen the faith of others in their praise and service of God. All
201 members are recognized to have a story; testimonies are not reserved to those with
202 special position.

203 In the GCF setting, faith stories brought together those who practiced this way of sharing
204 regularly with those who found it unfamiliar or even somewhat uncomfortable. But

205 experience with the practice has brought a new recognition that sharing such stories has
206 long been part of many traditions. While forms differ, diverse Christian traditions in
207 many cultures engage in the practice of identifying the actions of God in the life of
208 individuals and communities, as the ‘lives of the saints’ have shown from earliest times.
209 Through telling life stories of exemplars of holy faithfulness from this present time as
210 well as the past, Christians bear witness that God is still working in our midst and can be
211 helped to claim their own calling to be saints. (The New Testament writings frequently so
212 designate the followers of Jesus Christ, e.g. Acts 9:32, Romans 1:7, Hebrews 13:24.) To
213 identify the actions of God in our own lives and communities can be a spiritual practice
214 in which Christians shaped by diverse traditions participate together. Sharing faith stories
215 within the Forum invites us into broader experiences of this practice as they lead us back
216 to the continuing guidance of the Word of God.

217 The distinctiveness in GCF faith sharing is found in the scope of diversity among the
218 stories which are shared at every meeting. In sharing stories with one another in such
219 intentional breadth of company, each person encounters fresh perspectives, challenges,
220 and insights. Hearing from others, and knowing one is heard by others, can also enrich
221 each participant’s grasp of their own faith journeys. This experience bears witness that
222 the space for listening to each other and listening together allows the Spirit to be heard in
223 new ways.

224 Most characteristically, the personal faith stories told in GCF settings include relating the
225 parts played by faith communities, and the stories of communities themselves are also
226 told. Our capacity to grow in understanding other traditions is enhanced by hearing
227 participants reflect from their own perspectives and theological and ecclesial priorities,
228 and in their own terms. As with individual narratives, when these ecclesial stories are told
229 together, they are changed: in interaction with others, they are both told and heard in new
230 ways. From stories of particular Christian communities a growing sense of common
231 ground and shared direction can emerge, with the Holy Spirit bringing new life and
232 vitality.

233 The Forum’s experience has shown that this faith sharing strengthens mutual trust.
234 Regional and local meetings in particular have then been able to take up the commitment
235 of the Guiding Purpose Statement to ‘face together common challenges.’ The agenda is
236 designed to invite this sharing: it is deliberately left open and flexible to invite
237 participants to identify those concerns they want to highlight.

238 Hearing from one another about the issues that challenge them, participants can find
239 themselves stimulated to ‘bear one another’s burdens, and in this way to fulfil the law of
240 Christ’ (Galatians 6:2). It has been found that when there is deep spiritual sharing that
241 spans cultures and continents, and includes honesty about the experiences of suffering,
242 this in itself helps bring a deeper understanding of injustice.

243 Generally, participants move from faith sharing to identifying shared matters confronting
244 them which are priorities for their own contexts, and then examine them together. From
245 this, they have often then gone on to reflect on some of the most divisive issues which lie
246 between them. These conversations have been honest, searching, and contextually
247 specific. To find ways to move them forward remains a pressing concern for the Forum’s

248 future work. Through addressing both common concerns and issues that divide,
249 participants may make commitments to continue in dialogue or take other further steps
250 together, often beyond the Forum.

251 Other practices common to GCF gatherings also work together to create the space for
252 encounter and change. We share in morning and evening prayer, which sometimes is
253 offered from different traditions, providing a rich experience of diverse ways of prayer
254 and praise. On other occasions, the use of a common form, such as one reflecting the
255 practice of the Taizé Community, raises every voice to God together. With ample time
256 for meals and conversations over breaks, opportunity is created for people to form new
257 ties and relationships, perhaps with someone from the same church family but another
258 continent or from another tradition but the same language. The experience of these
259 practices multiplies the shared moments of narrating the heart of one's faith in a circle of
260 the widest possible diversity of Christian communities. In this context, even the familiar
261 practice of Bible study gains new depth, as insights emerge from interactions across such
262 diverse communities of faith.

263 Above all, it has been the practice of Forum meetings always to emphasise the continuing
264 work of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. The basis for all GCF commitment
265 to walking together has come from confident recognition that we all journey with Jesus
266 Christ, and it is he who journeys with all of us and whose presence can be seen in our
267 communities.

268 ***3. Moving Forward: The Continuing Journey***

269 Many participants in GCF meetings have reported that they were surprised by the
270 intensity of their new experience of 'receiving one another as Christ also received us'
271 (Romans 15:7 AV). They have wanted to continue to grow in closer relationship as they
272 return to the communities they represent, and to encourage others also to make this
273 journey with them. As it seeks God's future, the Forum increasingly is attentive to ways
274 of supporting this growing vision.

275 First, acknowledging that there are many Christian communities not represented in the
276 Forum, the GCF continues to ask who is not at the table, and to explore how to expand
277 the representation of those not present.

278 Second, recognising that its years of experience have yielded significant practical
279 wisdom, the GCF nurtures expanded access through sharing its methods more widely. It
280 is directly accompanying various geographic and thematic initiatives, as well as
281 developing resources to assist the use of GCF practices in a variety of contexts. These
282 resources include in particular stories of transformation and online information and tool-
283 kits.

284 Third, appreciating the theological weight and significance borne in the Forum process by
285 its varied forms of sharing faith experiences, the Forum will continue further to discern,
286 articulate and own the theological and ecclesiological insights which are emerging on its
287 journey. This discernment will involve both self-reflection and ongoing engagement with

288 other Christian bodies which seek to learn from, challenge, and build upon what is being
289 learned in the GCF.

290 Fourth, while remaining confident that it already makes a distinctive and valuable
291 contribution towards Christian unity through providing space for mutual recognition of
292 Christ's presence and Christian commitment among participants, the Forum seeks to
293 listen to the Spirit's guidance about other issues and arenas where its resources might
294 prove helpful

295 Finally, the GCF also seeks more intentionally to equip and support its participants as
296 they continue to respond to the work of the Spirit in their own settings. The Forum will
297 encourage them, as well as their churches and communities, to explore the wider
298 implications of the GCF experience for the sake of the unity of God's people so that the
299 world may believe.

300 While the Forum process will be communicated through a variety of means, its capacity
301 to capture the imagination of Christians and their communities comes first through a
302 direct experience of its life: one person witnessing to another how God is acting in the
303 life of the Church. Hence, the primary means of promoting the GCF and its aims comes
304 through the invitation to participate in its events. The best way to encounter and
305 understand what 'good comes out of' the GCF is to 'come and see' (John 1:46).

306 The Message from the second GCF global gathering in 2011 in Manado supported these
307 directions for the future:

308 We experience the open space in the Global Christian Forum as a gift of God. In a
309 fragmented world and church, this unique expression of unity...is a source of
310 inspiration and hope.... We know that God's Spirit draws the body of Christ into
311 unity for the sake of God's mission in the world. So we commit ourselves to nurture
312 the Global Christian Forum, as the Spirit leads, as witness to God's saving and
313 transforming love.

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