

Truly global: Financing the ecumenical future

by [Wesley Granberg-Michaelson](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

As the church's growth in the global South rapidly and radically reshapes the profile of world Christianity, separation between the major streams and families of faith is growing deeper every day. Living Christian traditions remain isolated from one another at a time when the demonstrated unity of Christian fellowship is necessary for a credible witness.

The reshaping of global Christianity is both confessional and geographical. Over the last 100 years, the Pentecostal movement has grown explosively, from a handful of multiracial Christians who experienced a spiritual awakening on Azusa Street in Los Angeles to 600 million Christians throughout the world. Today, one in four Christians around the globe is Pentecostal. If present trends continue, by the middle of the 21st century there will be 1 billion Pentecostal Christians. In just one century, the Pentecostal movement has become a major force shaping modern Christianity.

This impact is felt most in the global South; for example, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, an estimated 40 new Pentecostal congregations are started each week. The center of gravity for evangelicalism has moved from the North, and specifically from the U.S., to the South. Seventy percent of evangelicals live out their witness within the context of nations struggling on the underside of the global economic divide. One result of this shift is an evident movement toward holistic expressions of the gospel that integrate the biblical demand for God's justice with the call to spiritual conversion through commitment to Jesus Christ.

Indigenous expressions of the church, seen in groups like the African Instituted Churches, are also shaping the nature of world Christianity. Without roots in missionary or colonial Christianity from the West, these churches explore creative expressions of the gospel that are infused with the richness of local culture.

These movements that are surging in the South and spilling into the North, mostly through immigration, present a profound challenge to the search for Christian unity

and to the ecumenical movement. Many such churches have little or no connection to the ecumenical movement that seeks the visible expression of the “one holy catholic and apostolic church.” The vibrant spiritual power of these emerging churches often moves in ways that can easily be called sectarian.

The churches that carry the ecumenical vocation and that have been the bulwark of leadership and support for the World Council of Churches and related regional and national expressions of ecumenism are largely from the Orthodox and historic Protestant traditions. Today the WCC comprises only one quarter of world Christianity. There are more Pentecostals in the world today than there are members of all the WCC’s churches put together.

Those churches that carry a profound sense of historical tradition and that have a deep commitment to the catholicity—the unity—of the church need to be brought into meaningful fellowship with those churches that are growing explosively and expressing dramatic evidence of spiritual vitality. The reverse is just as true; emerging Christian movements need concrete fellowship linking them to the tradition and catholicity of the historic church.

Globally, there’s been no place—no table of fellowship, no regular point of gathering, no safe place for worship and prayer, no occasion for sharing and dialogue, and no way to discern any common witness—to draw together the leadership of all of the main streams of world Christianity. At the global level, evangelical, Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal and historic Protestant churches are without any visible, organized means to give concrete expression to the unity of Christ’s body.

That is the mission of the Global Christian Forum. The idea for the forum arose at the 1998 WCC Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, when the WCC recognized the need for broadening the scope of participation. Early consultations with evangelicals, Pentecostals and others made clear that a new space would need to be created to make this even a possibility. So the WCC agreed, in a courageous act of ecumenical hospitality, to assist with the exploration, recognizing that the resulting movement would not be under its control. The new group had to be genuinely new and neutral.

Over the past five years consultations were held in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. From the start, a representative of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has been a participant in the process. The steering committee includes representatives from highly respected evangelical, Pentecostal,

Orthodox, Anglican and historic Protestant bodies.

These efforts culminated in the Global Christian Forum's first major global gathering in Limuru, Kenya, in November 2007, which attracted 225 leaders. Research groups carried out external evaluations, and last November a core group of 50 participants and supporters met in New Delhi, India, to draft a three-year plan. The plan included a recent visit to church leaders in the Middle East by a team from the forum. More regional meetings are planned, and the next global gathering is scheduled for 2011.

This expansive and inspiring vision is supported by an infrastructure that is ludicrously sparse. The only staff work done for the Global Christian Forum is provided by Hubert Van Beek, a retired WCC official who works out of his apartment in Geneva and has sacrificially devoted thousands of hours to the details of this process. The forum's steering committee launched a search for a full-time secretary to take on the executive role that has until now been fulfilled by Van Beek. Applicants have responded, but the funds to provide assurance of a salary over the next three years are simply not on hand.

The total administrative costs of the Global Christian Forum have come to less than \$100,000 per year, not including costs to support various meetings and consultations. From 2009 until the projected global gathering in 2011, total costs are estimated at only \$690,000. Compared with the multimillion-dollar budgets of established ecumenical organizations, this amount seems like spare change. However, traditional funds for ecumenical efforts are shrinking dramatically. Long-established organizations are struggling simply to sustain themselves.

The hope for global Christian unity faces an ironic dilemma. The prospects for a breakthrough in building genuine bonds of global fellowship between Catholic, evangelical, Pentecostal, Orthodox, Anglican and historic Protestant streams of Christianity have never been greater. But the modest, fragile mechanism facilitating this magnificent calling is trying to survive on crumbs.

So here's a modest proposal: find \$1 million that will be spent over three years to build unity in fellowship within the world's Christian community. Our Lord yearns for this unity, which has never been expressed inclusively on the global level. A decade of work has created networks of trusting relationships among diverse Christian leaders previously isolated from one another, an infrastructure is in place, and a three-year plan has been approved. If money truly does follow vision with a

reasonable assurance of implementation, then finding \$1 million for the Global Christian Forum should not be difficult. In the history of the ecumenical movement, there has never been a time when such a modest investment could yield such an expansive result.

Following World War II, Dutch theologian Willem Visser 't Hooft, the founding general secretary of the WCC, had lunch with John D. Rockefeller. Over the course of their discussion, Rockefeller asked Visser 't Hooft what he would do with \$1 million. Visser 't Hooft immediately responded that he would establish an ecumenical study center to gather young theologians from around the world to study, learn, and build fellowship around the call to Christian unity.

Rockefeller gave him the money, with which Visser 't Hooft founded the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland, near Geneva. To this day, the institute, working with the World Council of Churches, has been building Christian unity among hundreds of younger theologians.

That's what is needed today. As the profile of world Christianity shifts dramatically, the need to heed the prayer of Jesus that we may be one for the sake of our common witness becomes not just a theological challenge, but a practical imperative. The way has been prepared; what's needed now is for the right people somewhere in the world to have lunch.