

Reformation in our world today: Ecumenical Conversation

by Dr. Agnes Aboum, leader of WCC

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The theme of our seminar presupposes that reformation is an on-going process but not endless and a supposition that I subscribe to. What then is reformation one may ask? Reformation is a process of renewal, change, restoration etc. Besides, reformation can be organizational, societal and individual. In our case this today, we are here to reflect on reformation in the life and work of the worldwide church. Thus it is a process that touches on beliefs, faith, practice as well as the nature and scope of relationships. To reform in other words is to transform and organizational and human life are bound to undergo change. Thus as we commemorate 500 years of reformation, we should be mindful that prior to Martin Luther there were processes of renewal and or change. A case in point is the medieval church that reformed the popular superstition that prevailed at the time outlawing it. It is also essential to remind ourselves that reformation can be major with far reaching consequences or minor such as revising the Anglican Common Prayer Book without deviating from the key tenants.

Reformation process can be peaceful or violent as was witnessed in Western Europe during the protestant reformation. Today we experience low profile conflicts within the church when change is undertaken and even departure of members who do not accept the proposed reforms.

Context determined reformation..... Reflecting on reformation today reminds us that it is a context informed undertaking. Throughout the history of humankind, change is directed, informed and even initiated by pull and push factors within the socio-economic and political landscape. Five hundred years ago, the driving factors for reformation included spiritual, ethical, political and sociological aspects. The great reformers were concerned about the corruption in the church, the interpretation of sacred texts. But impetus to reform was also informed by

the rise of nationalism and the general humanism. In other words, there was exploitation of the poor, marginalization of people, misuse and abuse of power and authority by the leadership of the day, and the rich could buy their way. A bird's eye view of our current context today may be slightly different from five hundred years ago but many of the issues of the time have metamorphosed in our church structures around the world. I therefore submit that reformation to-day is an imperative and our church, political and economic context dictates the same. It is an imperative because we have practices, beliefs, systems and policies in our churches and society that call us to protest and to re-order our way of life, relationships and use of power. I will share three areas that pose challenges and which require reformation. These are broad and general.

Areas that challenge us to continue reformation in our world today

(1). Unity of the Church/Unity in Diversity..... Divisions and schisms of over centuries ago, that have divided the church still prevail in our time and point to the scandal that we must overcome. There is no doubt that the levels of hostility are not as high or as broad as they were before. And yet we are still far from achieving the goal of the ecumenical forefathers and foremothers. The constituting assembly of WCC in 1948 at Amsterdam was pained by the divisions that dogged the church and the formation of the ecumenical council was to forge conciliar fellowship. These divisions were exported to the global south. We Reformation to-day as we seek unity of the church, does not imply *uniformity*, rather, it means acceptance of the other, fellowshiping with the other, respect of the other, invitation of the other to the table. It is more about having all of us at the table and in the household of God. In my view, it does not about working to each the other and about celebrating our different gifts and traditions without glorifying our ethnic and national boundaries. Every time we meet at the WCC governing body meetings and we accept and admit new member churches, I have had mixed feelings as I have wondered why so many churches? What happened to the story of "Uniting Churches"? Was it a mistake?

Reformation in the church today continues to bear the mark of overcoming the wounds of division and conflict. Therefore through the pilgrimage of justice and peace, we can argue that to-day we can revisit the wounds and pain but seek to transform them as is already being done through the various ecumenical dialogues. There is need to encourage and strengthen the various intra-Christian bilateral dialogues such as Anglican –Orthodox or Lutheran –Catholic dialogue processes. These dialogue processes although at a high level of church leadership provide space for cooperation and mutual better understanding of each other.

As an African Anglican from Kenya, I did not choose to become an Anglican neither did a Lutheran. It was determined by the colonial regime in its allocation of geographical spaces to the various mission organizations. We received and ate graciously what was served to us including the pejorative and negative profiling of their communions. However, after so many decades and if we share the same faith in Jesus Christ, why do we have to continue erecting walls of separation, division and animosity one may ask?

Reformation of the church should be the continuation of national or regional council of churches platforms that enhance broader and deeper encounters between the various confessional families and renewal of church life. Through these spaces provided by the councils ecumenical dialogue takes place and service work in society is undertaken together. These platforms are as broad as to include Orthodox, Catholic and Pentecostal churches. They also provide support to the dialogue process by communions. Unfortunately, many national councils struggle with issues of resources that tend to undermine their relevance and vitality.

(2) Renewal and strengthening of theological formation --- Five hundred years ago the reformation made the Bible more accessible through translation work and this is an important ministry in equipping the people of God. However, for appropriate understanding and interpretation of the Bible formation of

ministers/pastors to guide the sheep and facilitate in nurturing faith is critical. Today the scripture is like a sea/ocean very available but people are left to swim in this sea without adequate or informed interpretation. The rise of charismatic movement in many parts of the globe that at times does not believe in the robust training of pastors and church workers, risks bringing ordinary folk in to the ocean where they cannot swim. Obviously the training should be relevant and scriptural. The need to equip people with the word cannot be overstated in view of competing interests and decline in attendance of church services. It therefore behooves the church to rethink strategies of keeping the word of God relevant, alive and vital in the lives of 21st century Christians.

(3) Unity of humankind ... In Amsterdam the ecumenical movement was concerned both about issues of justice through life and work movement including the healing of nations after the gruesome world wars that left the world and not least Europe devastated. After the WWII, many global institutions came into being such as the United Nations so as to regulate global political and economic relations not least respect of human dignity and human rights. Today the world is more divided with a few people controlling the world's resources leaving majority languishing in poverty. Reformation to-day is about the church speaking truth to power on matters of justice and peace for all. It is about the church continuing to reform to be an instrument of justice and peace.

Indeed unity of human kind and fellowship between people is impossible or at least undermined by powers that dehumanize and segregate people along racial and religious lines. Reformation today would imply the church together with people of other faiths and good will pursuing jointly that which makes for sustainable peace and justice in a world so wounded and fragmented and with millions on the move in search of livelihood and security. As the WCC Unity statement observes, if God's mission for the world is to heal the history and experiences of brokenness, wounds and division; then reformation is about the church and we Christians being healed first in order to become wounded healers

of these historical wounds and suffering/pain. It would mean that reformation is protesting against and reforming divers of conflict, marginalization and exclusion that deny majority of people a dignified and abundant life in any part of the world irrespective of color, creed etc. . It is to affirm and practice the ethos that we all are travellers on the planet and we all belong to this planet given to us by God.

Dominion Theology/Thinking of creation versus stewardship diaconia ... For a long time, our theological and development paradigms have engaged with creation from a domination and extraction perspective. We have practiced a pattern of plundering resources and negating our stewardship role and responsibility for accountability instead of being custodians for future generations. To-day's reformation is to refute the dominion theology, teaching and practice that have allowed political and economic systems to plunder mother earth. Reformation is to continue to be intentional and deliberate about climate justice already started at the COP 20 in Paris. Strengthen a theology, thinking and practice of a caring, nurturing and renewing of nature so that that we can bequeath future generations a living planet and not a dead planet. Perhaps here we can draw lessons from other faiths as we walk an interfaith pilgrimage of cooperation to reform our relationships with mother earth. As we continue to draw on the spirituality of indigenous people and other traditional resources, radical reformation is demanded of us, in our life styles, consumption patterns and relationships with economic power houses.

ConclusionReformation to-day in church is to be more inclusive than we are without losing the scriptural basis and foundations of our faith. We are challenged to develop a better/positive understanding and perception of the other; to share the diverse gifts at the table without demanding uniformity but celebrating diversity. We must reform our negative nationalistic and ethnic mindsets vis-à-vis the other and to view the church as universal

On-going and more dialogues should be encouraged to overcome historical wounds and divisions. Reformation in pursuit of a common humanity is an imperative challenging forces and powers that subjugate and dehumanize the people of God. Let us draw on the resources of other faiths and traditions; of men and women of good will for a just and peaceful world and for a church for all.

Thank you for listening to me. The journey of reformation continues at various levels