

Taking Sides: Governance and Accountability; reflections from WACC President

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From Cairo to London/ Brighton

It is my joy and privilege to welcome you to this Central Committee. I especially recognize all who are new and ask all those who were last year in Cairo to help orient and make our sisters and brother feel at home in this meeting. I hope that we shall all use our time here to renew our old friendships and make new friends even as we journey together to make WACC accountable as an organization that is ?taking sides?.

I am happy to report to you that during the time between Cairo and now, I carried out my responsibility as president of WACC with full support from the Officers, Finance Committee, General Secretary and staff. The General Secretary and I have maintained open communication emailing, talking on the phone and we even managed to fit in one full day together just to think and reflect on issues we felt that needed deeper considerations.

The Officers and Central Committee met in London in May of this year and the results of our work will be reflected in the agenda of this meeting. I would like to assure you that the General Secretary has diligently kept us informed on matters of governance that require our knowledge as Officers and the Finance Committee. We have struggled with the staff to find solutions to challenges we face as an organization. We bring those challenges and suggested solutions for your consideration in this Central Committee.

On behalf of the whole of WACC movement I ask the Central Committee to join me in once again expressing our thanks and gratitude to the General Secretary and all staff for their diligence and commitment to WACC.

WACC within the OIKOUMENE

In Vancouver, I reflected on what ?taking sides? might mean for WACC theologically. In Cairo, I underscored the importance of strategic planning and how our being strategic about what we do can be a roadmap to where we want to be as an organization.

For this Central Committee, I would like to reflect on matters of governance and accountability. This Central Committee is special because it marks the end of our three-year cycle when we democratically roll over our leadership. New people will join the governance and even those who will be asked to continue will adjust their way of working as a respect to the new cycle and new people.

Our identity as World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) defines our global nature, our Christian foundation and our specialization in Communication. Thus WACC is both a faith based ecumenical organization as well as an NGO. Managing these two areas of our identity well is part of what makes us credible and faithful to our identity.

We have a proverb in my language which translates as ?only fools forget their mothers? The moral of the proverb is don?t forget your roots, no matter what they are.

WACCs roots are in the Christian Ecumenical movement. To establish our credibility we need all

the time to review whether we are faithful to our history as and why WACC was established as an ecumenical instrument for Christian communication. I have been thinking about this and I ask myself, why are we not the most important ecumenical communication organization in the world? How did we turn out to become mostly an advocacy organization doing campaigns and a development agency funding projects and an academic organization writing difficult books for university students to grapple with? I don't mean to say that what we are doing is not important or is of sub-standard level, but I want us to reflect on what we bring to the ecumenical table. I believe we need to take time in our agenda from time to time to reflect on what Christian means in our name. We must continue to explain, both to members and external people, how we live out the "Christian" in our name. Is this our value, our history, our faith earning or what?

Three years ago, the World Council of Churches initiated a process to enable the ecumenical movement to reassess itself with a goal to change, so as to be in line with changes that have taken place in society. Meetings have taken place and the consultation is still taking place under the general framework of the Reconfiguration of the Ecumenical Movement. Randy Naylor, our General Secretary serves on the Committee that has to take this forward.

To be at that table as WACC, we have to bring our dish, because the meal is a potluck. What do we as WACC bring to the ongoing discussion? What is our own reconfiguration? I have been thinking and reflecting on this question and have come to the conclusion that unless we too are willing to reconfigure, we shall be at the table empty handed and only partaking of other people dishes without contributing something. I think this is not right.

There are many things happening to WACC and to the whole NGO world that can give us legitimacy to rethink our identity, strategies and ways of work. The fact that big set-ups such as the UN and the WCC are rethinking their mandate gives us an opportunity to slip in there and reposition this movement for the next 50 years. We need a process, and courage to do so sooner rather than later, otherwise our credibility will become weaker and weaker each year. Let me reflect with you a little deeper on what is happening in the NGO world of which we are a part.

The changing role of NGOs

The leadership and members of WACC have an enormous challenge to keep up with dramatic and continuous societal changes. Notable is the changing nature of NGOs, with a strong shift from general to specific focus, issues rather than membership, small rather than big, dynamic rather than static, and quick response rather than slow bureaucracy. NGOs are expected to deliver scaled up impact rather than small projects. The use of technology for fast communication is often assumed rather than preferred. Today's world requires NGOs to be responsive and adjust quickly to environmental changes.

The nature, size and functions of staff and board leadership are also points of debate. As NGOs face growing demands from stakeholders and funding agencies, more professional training and skills are required from staff and board members. There is decreasing desire for representation to be the only criteria for recruiting staff and volunteer leaders.

Technology today plays an increasing role in board decision-making, with meetings taking place via a mixture of face-to-face and technology-supported methods, such as video conferencing and forums and the now aged e-mail. Important questions for NGOs to consider include: Should future boards be smaller and more dynamic to respond to rapid change? How can NGOs act more effectively and enable deeper involvement in decision-making by target communities while adjusting to today's societal changes? Are there meaningful ways to involve volunteers, communities and the broad spectrum of stakeholders other than through boards? Participation invites commitment, and there is a stronger investment in things that people do themselves than in those which are safely brought to them in beautiful wrapping. Achievement, responsibility, productivity and satisfaction are better accomplished in an environment of teamwork, where people grow from depending on each other.

There is increasing competition for philanthropic dollars as the numbers of NGOs mushroom and funding sources undergo major shifts. Programme funding is preferred over core funding and more is required in the reporting of impact rather than simply the activities carried out. There are growing numbers of cooperative projects between NGOs and the private sector. It is trendy nowadays for NGOs and even the United Nations (UN) to seek funding from anyone prepared to give. The fact that NGOs often have limited resources frequently translates into the desire to go after bigger donations at all costs. NGOs are getting into relationships, some of which may be out of tune with their mission. There is a great rush to organizational alliances under the emblem of strategic partnerships to demonstrate scale and leverage resources while raising visibility. As in the business world, partnerships between NGOs are continually forming and dissolving. Trust is invested among people whom know each other and there is fear of new partnerships. The current is flowing so fast that only those that are well grounded can manage to crest the waves.

Reforms are taking place in many multilateral organizations, including the UN, and the WCC as they find that they cannot sustain their infrastructure. Organizations with heavy overhead costs for their headquarters have lost much credibility. Donors are now insisting that their funding reaches the community level. Downsizing, reorganization, consolidation and retrenchment are all current agendas as donor trends continue to include localization of resources and the establishment of bilateral relationships with grassroots initiatives.

These changes are taking place both globally and at the community level, and are driven by social trends, economic forces and technological innovation. The resource and organizational pressure generated by these changes are perhaps greater now than any other time. Planning has become more difficult yet very much in demand. Opportunities abound but require human and financial resources to develop and pursue them. In the past boards were content to establish and monitor policies around current missions and programmes. Significant transformation will thrust boards into major decision-making modes in order to ensure the future of their organizations.

Looking at our own reality

Against this turbulent and dynamic backdrop, there is an urgent need for WACC in particular to take a step back and reflect on our response to this rapidly changing world which often does not fit with the WACC's pace for change, culture and practice and it may even pose challenge to our brand theme 'taking sides'.

In my own paid professional job at the World YWCA, we have chosen to explore some of these issues and we have invited ourselves to be in conversations with other NGOs especially women's NGOs. We are also keenly discussing what the 'C' in our name, Young Women's Christian Association means and we want to bring that to the Ecumenical Reconfiguration. As we talk to others we continually learn about our own strength and weakness. There are things that make us envious, and others that we thank God that we are not in their shoes.

We have learnt in the YWCA some things that we think are valuable to us. For example, many international NGOs are opting for smaller boards both as a response to financial constraints as well as the need to operate more efficiently and intensely in a rapidly changing environment. This is good for us because it affirms our desire to maintain a small Board rather than accept the requests by many of our constituents to expand our Board. Some NGOs are connecting more people to their work by matching needs and talents, as well as enabling more skill and knowledge exchanges between stakeholders. We want to learn how they are doing it and try it out too. So we are strategizing on our future and have decided to completely overhaul our constitution so that it reflects where we are today in the world of the ecumenical movement and also in the NGO world. We hope to propose this to the Council where we have over 1000 delegates.

We are finding out that our most urgent need is to have effective communication to all our stakeholders. We are not experts in communication. So where do we go to? Is WACC in a position to take up issues of communication for other ecumenical organizations such as the World

YWCA? The question I'm trying to lead to is: "how can we in the ecumenical and NGO worlds share our expertise?" How can WACC, WCC and others benefit from the expertise we bring to the table as a women's leadership organization? How can we in the Ecumenical movement leverage our efforts to make the ecumenical movement stronger in the 21st century? Even if we have no answers we must think about these things. The time is now and the WCC has given us space by opening up the discussion on the Ecumenical Reconfiguration.

Financing core expenses

For many years, the ecumenical NGOs like WACC, World YWCA and others have operated their programme activities with steady support from ecumenical donor agencies. Our organizations received stable core grants that supported our operating expenses and part of our programme activities. Core grants are now declining. After two years of experimenting with fundraising methods to address the situation, we continue to see a strong shift from core to programme funding. This trend demands a reassessment of how core expenses, including staffing at the headquarters, are managed. We need the right number of staff to efficiently fulfill necessary functions. At this moment in history, it is wise to begin thinking of innovative ways to involve member associations in specific tasks.

Slow but sure is still a valid way to go

Changes that last are those which are congruent with the mission of the institution. If the core of our mission is communication for the empowerment of communities, then this must inform everything we do, including how we think about our structure, form of governance, programmes, resources, partners and the future. The more we link the changes we want to see to our core mission, the more worthwhile it will be to risk re-positioning the entire movement in that direction. Changes that last are those that have a strong foundation and address genuine needs.

We need to think strategically and listen carefully to the expectations of member associations, while taking into account external trends. There is strength in remaining a membership organization. However, choosing that option requires us to have a clear strategy for making WACC the kind of organization that indeed will attract members. WACC needs to carefully analyze how much money we need to carry out our mission, which donors and partners we would like to be associated with, and how we want to allocate funds. It is imperative that WACC sustains its current donors. In addition to many individuals, the European ecumenical agencies are the most consistent funding partners for WACC. We need to take into account the views of our members and of partners in the decisions we make. When we make choices, we need to do so with open eyes having considered all consequences. If our choices do not speak to ?taking sides? we shall be contradicting ourselves and putting our credibility to question.

Finally, let us all be reminded that we meet here as leaders. We have a responsibility in this meeting to elect new leaders. The Scripture invites us to be servant leaders. Servant leaders do not seek their own prestige but the welfare of others. Our Christian foundation commands us to let our credibility be measured by the wisdom of God. We will not be perfect but we will be honest. It is often said that what makes a good leader is not the ability to avoid failure but rather the capacity to get up and try once more. As directors of WACC, let us strive to be good leaders by providing the vision and direction that this movement needs. This is our task and it requires that we pose questions to ourselves, our staff, our Officers, our Finance Committee and our President. We can do so in humility and respect but with determination to make WACC the best World Association for Christian Communication.

Thank you.