The Conference on World Mission and Evangelism “Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship”

8-13 March 2018, Arusha, Tanzania. Some Preliminary and Personal
Reflections from an Orthodox Perspective

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Introduction

The World Council of Churches' (WCC) Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) organized a new world mission conference in Arusha, Tanzania, from 8th to 13th March 2018 under the theme “Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship.” The Conference stays in the long tradition of the International Missionary Council and of the WCC mission conferences held roughly every decade. It included representatives sent by WCC member churches, the Roman-Catholic Church and wider mission networks, in particular those linked to evangelical and Pentecostal/Charismatic churches.

The Conference took place in the African context of Tanzania, being the second conference of this kind organized on this continent, after Achimota, Ghana (1958). Tanzania proved to be, in principal, the ideal place for organizing a conference of this kind. It is a country where both mainline Christian churches and new Christian movements have grown very rapidly in the last decades. Tanzania is also a country where Christianity and Islam co-exist quite peacefully and have developed a constructive relationship which could be presented as a model for Africa and beyond.

The theme of the Conference “Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship” was inspired from Galatians 5.25: “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.” A pneumatologic theme for a Conference of this kind seemed to be timely indeed and the use of a Biblical text as the starting point is the most appropriate way to approach it. Also the theme

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of discipleship defined as “transforming” was insufficiently approached and researched in the past, therefore the initiative of the Conference to invite such a reflection was highly appreciated.

The organizers of the Conference spoke about four main characteristics of the Conference: (1) missiological, (2) ecumenical, (3) African and (4) a conference of younger mission leaders.

The Conference was planned to be an experience of *mission* today; mission being understood as a multivalent activity. That includes joyful witness in word and deed to the Person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and his Gospel; commitment to working for justice and reconciliation among all peoples and within all of creation; and participation in interfaith, secular, and ecumenical dialogue that seeks mutual understanding and common witness. The Conference was aimed at celebrating the unity of all peoples as well as to marvel at their God-given diversity. It intended to reflect thoughtfully on various issues of missionary practice and searched for new ways of being faithful to *mission Dei* in the world, being led by the Spirit.

The Conference was planned to be *ecumenical*, meaning firstly that those attending the conference shall actively represent their own traditions: Orthodox, Roman-Catholic, Protestant, Anglican etc.; secondly that efforts shall be made to engage the conference delegates in an open, loving and honest ecumenical dialogue; thirdly that the Conference shall celebrate the unity of the churches and the unity between church and mission already achieved, while lamenting that the scandal of disunity between churches still exists; and fourthly that the Conference shall encourage local ecumenical initiatives, especially African, in their efforts to achieve unity among churches in particular areas.

The conference was planned to be *African* in the sense that (a) the spirit of African rhythms, music, and art should pervade the environment in which the conference took place, and in the times of worship; (b) the Conference should deal both with signs of threat and promise that particularly affect Africa; (c) the Conference should use the rich gifts of African Christianity in terms of its spirituality and cultivation of life; (d) the Conference should promote the contribution of the African context to current perspectives and understandings of mission, and to sharing mission theology and practice into the future; (e) a significant number of the speakers, plenary addresses and worship leaders would be African.

Finally, the conference would give priority to *younger mission leaders*. One of the aims of the Conference was to influence the future mission thinking and practice, therefore it was important that youth of the church actively participate in it. One hundred young students, scholars, and church

leaders participated in a program called Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI) which not only had its own program of formation before and after the Conference, but also took active part in all activities of the Conference. Also the number of youth participants from the various constituencies of CWME was significant.

About 800 delegates (500 international, 200 African, and 100 GETI students) attended the Conference. The Romanian Orthodox Church was represented by a delegation of mainly professors of missiology.

Some Preliminary and Personal Reflections on the Arusha Conference from an Orthodox Perspective

The intention of this essay is to present some preliminary and personal reflections on the Arusha Conference from an Orthodox perspective. In other words this essay will describe the personal experience of the authors who attended the Arusha Conference as WCC staff and delegates and comment on some of their experiences at the conference.

First of all, the country chosen to host the conference, Tanzania, was an appropriate one for the Orthodox tradition. As already mentioned, Orthodoxy is well represented in Tanzania thanks to the mission of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa. The beginnings of the Orthodox presence in Tanzania are linked with the British colonial period of Tanzania when Orthodox Greeks moved to these parts of the world. The post-colonial period meant a period of decline, as many of the private properties were nationalised and land was confiscated. Many Greeks left Tanzania after selling their church buildings to other Christian communities, especially those established by American missions. After 1992, when Tanzania became a multi-party state, Greek-speaking communities started to emerge again. Orthodoxy in Tanzania is far from being Greek only. Relatively early the Greek Orthodox living in Tanzania started evangelising the local population, initially more at the personal initiative of some clergy and lay people, and later in a more systematic way, so that today most of the Orthodox in Tanzania are from the local population. Arusha however is not a big centre of Orthodoxy in Tanzania. There is an Orthodox church building in the city and a young and enthusiastic Greek bishop was installed about a year ago.

Orthodoxy was represented in Arusha in three ways: by the *local* community from Arusha and Tanzania; by “*African*” representatives, i.e. an official delegation of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, clergy and a choir of the Theological Seminary in Nairobi brought by H.E. Metropolitan Makarios of Kenya, also a member of CWME; and by *differ-*

ent delegations representing Orthodox Churches from all over the world. The performance (both singing and dancing) of the choir, both in Sunday Liturgy and in the plenary meeting, was highly appreciated. Their performance in the last day of the conference, to which H.E. Metropolitan Makarios of Kenya joined both in singing and dancing, became viral on the Internet.

It was regrettable that in the last session of Thursday March 8th, which was called “Tanzania Mission Evening”, there was no representation of the Orthodox mission in this country. Certainly, the Orthodox would have had a lot to say about their mission in the host country. The reason for the absence of Orthodox witness was certainly some miscommunication.

For Orthodox participants in the Arusha Conference, a high point was certainly the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, in Arusha, in the Orthodox Church building, on Sunday March 11th. The Liturgy was presided by H.E. Metropolitan Elpidophoros of Bursa (Ecumenical Patriarchate). Bishops and priests representing all Orthodox delegations concelebrated or took communion. A message from the Patriarch of Alexandria was presented and representatives of all delegations presented short messages of greetings and gratitude and offered gifts to the local bishop. The choir of the Theological Seminary in Nairobi performed both in English and Swahili. The Divine Liturgy in Arusha was a high spiritual experience both for Orthodox delegates and locals, as well as for many non-orthodox people who chose to attend. It was a clear sign of how global and inclusive Orthodoxy is and/or could be. The Agape offered afterwards by the local community was an opportunity for sharing between clergy and seminarians and for directly experiencing African Orthodox realities. As Romanians, we were glad to hear the statement of the Arusha Orthodox bishop that a nun’s monastery aimed to develop monasticism in the region was founded by nuns coming from Romania (Metropolity of Moldavia).

Another important moment for intra-Orthodox sharing was the meeting of all Orthodox participants (both Eastern and Oriental) i. e. official delegates, WCC staff, stewards, locals etc. in the evening of Monday, March 12th. His Holiness Ignatius Mor Aphrem II, Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church, presented in detail the situation of the Christians in Syria, and answered questions. Experiences during the conference were shared, especially thoughts on how the final message of the conference could contain points which are important for Orthodoxy.

In terms of Orthodox contribution and witness in the plenaries of the Conference, the following are worth mentioning: A video message of His All Holiness Bartholomew, The Ecumenical Patriarch, screened as the first video message of a church leader, before the Roman Pope and the Archbishop of

Canterbury in the opening plenary, on Thursday morning, March 8th; the inputs given as panellists in the plenary on Evangelism, Friday, March 9th by H.E. Metropolitan Makarios of Kenya, H.E. Metropolitan Iosif Bosch from Argentina and Prof. Dr Dimitra Koukoura; the keynote address of H. H. Ignatius Mor Aphrem II, Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church entitled “Embracing the Cross Today in the Context of the Middle East” in the plenary “Embracing the Cross”, Tuesday, March 13th. Patriarch Ignatius presented a moving input on the situation of Christians in the Middle East, including a video on the level of distractions caused by the so-called Islamic state in Syria, but also the sign of hope for rebuilding a future for Christians in that region.

Two plenaries were moderated by Orthodox leaders: opening plenary, on Thursday morning, March 8th, moderated by Metropolitan Dr Mor Geevarghese Coorilos (Oriental Orthodox); and the plenary “Embracing the Cross”, Tuesday, March 13th moderated by H.E. Makarios of Kenya. An important Orthodox witness was the noon prayer organized by the Orthodox Church.

Unfortunately, Orthodox presence in *Sokoni* (marketplace in Swahili) and *Warsha* (meaning in Swahili, more or less, workshop or seminar) was almost non-existent. This is a chronic problem for Orthodox in ecumenical gatherings: we are not really able to mobilize our resources and propose projects of this kind, resulting in a decreased Orthodox witness in ecumenical environments.

Keeping in mind the theme of the Conference “Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship,” one could expect the Arusha conference to be a place of reflection on the pneumatologic dimension of mission in the context of previous reflection on the Trinitarian and /or Christological dimensions of it. Surprisingly, this debate played rather a marginal role.

Was the Arusha Conference missiological, ecumenical, African and a conference of younger mission leaders, as its concept envisaged? In our opinion, everyone who attended the Arusha Conference expected more sharing on the experience of mission today. An African Orthodox participant shared with us, at a personal level, his frustration with the content of the conference. He said, “A significant percentage of Africans do not receive the Gospel in a systematic way. I expected that this conference would be more about how to bring the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to them. Here everything was discussed and debated except this matter.”

Even the newly developed concept of “mission from the margins” did not play a central role. Dominating themes were, in our opinion, gender justice in relationship with mission and reconciliation with and inclusion

of minorities, especially the sexual ones. It is also our opinion that majority of attendees expected other themes to dominate the debates and the spirit of the conference. The Bible studies went mainly in the same directions in ways and manners barely digestible by Orthodox participants. Some *Sokoni* (marketplace in Swahili) on gender justice were disturbing, even shocking for some Orthodox.

The Arusha Conference was “ecumenical” in the sense described in its concept. Was it also “African” in the fivefold sense of its concept briefly described in the introduction of this essay? Certainly, the Conference was dominated by African sounds of drums, dances, songs and art. However, we doubt that the Conference properly dealt with signs of threat and promise that particularly affect Africa. Rather, favourite themes of some churches in the global north were suggested or imposed on African contributors. Youth participation was fortunately significant. GETI increased youth participation, including the Orthodox. As academics, we can only hope that Orthodox attendees will have also the power of discernment, since some trends within GETI are, for Orthodox eyes, quite disturbing.

The *Arusha Call to Discipleship* drafted by a group in which the Orthodox were excellently represented by one member, is acceptable for Orthodox eyes. However, its prophetic dimension is rather modest and reflects, only on a low level, the Orthodox concerns and priorities related with mission.

We are convinced that Orthodox missiology has a lot to contribute to the theme of the Conference. It is our hope that the theme of transforming discipleship will be further reflected by Orthodox missiologists, the Arusha Conference being more of an input for such a reflection.

Finally, if someone would ask us, authors of these reflections: “Was it worthwhile to attend the Arusha Conference?” the response could be, in spite of all criticisms formulated here, only YES! It was a great opportunity to hear about the trends and perspectives in mission. It depends on the wisdom of everyone to pick up what is meaningful and adapt to his or her own context.