

Drafting Team Report: 19 May 2022

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Questions for the Discernment Session on 18 May 2022 focused on General Council Planning.

On the Theme: “Persevere in Your Witness”

What does “Persevere in Your Witness” sound like in your native tongue? How does this speak to your context?

It is appropriate the considerable work that has already been undertaken in planning the next General Council and the General Council Task Group and Asia Consortium are to be commended.

The various Discernment Groups discussed this question in various ways. For one group time was spent hearing “*perseverance*” in different languages; another considered the limitations of using the term “*perseverance*” while another discussed the challenge of “*perseverance*.”

In the first case, there was brilliance and meaningful excitement reported in hearing how the word – *persevere* - sounds in the native tongue and there was a strong recommendation that this rainbow of witness should be incorporated into General Council communications and activities. While many were able to contextualize the need for “*perseverance*” as we emerge from COVID-19, some were concerned that there may be an implication of staying in the same place. Do we not need to emphasize the transformational aspect of our faith as we move forward? Is “*perseverance*” not somewhat passive in nature? Should we be looking at a theme of “*persevere in transformative witness*.” This, however, was not the consensus view across groups. In another group, “*persevere*” was seen as an active verb and, moreover, an imperative – a command. This can therefore be perceived to be a call to action and witness, to challenge difficulties and to overcome hurdles. It is a call not to be discouraged, to be resistant to many of the demands of reality, to witness and to position oneself on firm and stable ground.

In terms of context-setting, “*persevere*” was seen as being appropriate in many situations. As a selected set of examples, from the struggles of many small congregations post-COVID-19 to the killing of Christians (church people) in Cameroon to the whole concept of deconstructing faith by young people and the need to “*persevere*” to rebuild.

Overall, there was clearly general positivity towards the theme and the context-setting of its usage; the Planning Committee might benefit from considering the various understandings and perceptions of the word “*persevere*” outlined above, and how to ensure clarity of thought and meaning in the communication of the theme.

What do you think are the implications of the theme in a “post-pandemic” world in which violence and inequality are endemic particularly as we attempt to move into a “new normal?”

There was much duplication of issues in the discussion of this question with what had been previously discussed in the first question. Comments were, generally, considerably briefer in nature in response to this question. There was again much conversation around the concept of conversion and the transformative nature of perseverance. There was a general desire that the theme needed to be seen as witnessing in both words and deeds – the theme of needing concrete action as evidence of witness was made across the group.

What is “*normal*?” Before we attempt to move into the new “normal,” we need to know what that “*normal*” is, in fact, referring to.

It was highlighted that as well as the endemic violence and equality noted in the question and exemplified by various members of the Discernment Groups, the transformative demand on our faith to encounter climate change and the latter’s transformation of our world, God’s creation was also highlighted. Several comments were also made on the need to learn from the pandemic for after the pandemic – identifying true communion and learning from one another.

How could the theme direct the work and witness of the WCRC leading up to and through the Council?

Throughout these three questions it was clear that all Discernment Groups had found common threads and that common themes ran through all questions. Throughout the excitement and encouragement of developing a “full communion” was prevalent.

There was a general feeling across groups that encouraging this concept of transformation through the “persevere in your witness” theme could provide focus for member churches as they prepare for the General Council. This could provide the necessary “push” to become more active. Is there an opportunity to develop a series of Bible studies that would aid this activating transformation? Building this witness over the next 2-3 years was considered an important aspect of preparation for General Council as many, if not all of us, feel a sense of dislocation post-pandemic.

It was also suggested that the theme could act as a catalyst to firstly hear, secondly collate, and thirdly share stories of what has happened. These could include reports of how the church has dealt with the sense of loneliness felt by members, questions that have been raised regarding the right to medical care, and possibly among the most important, the involvement of and pastoral work among young people.

An important comment from one Discernment Group was that consideration and analysis of the theme could lead to opportunities to develop not only ecumenism within the Christian community, but also at an interfaith level. Indeed, this latter discussion was contextualized in a role for the regions.

Given that no clear consensus on any changes to the wording of the theme emerged, the following action is placed before the Executive for consideration:

The Executive Committee adopts “Persevere in Your Witness” as the theme for the 2025 General Council.

On Planning Participation

Do you feel that the General Council Planning Committee effectively represents the Communion? What do you believe is missing?

There was a general feeling across the Groups of a potential – albeit totally unintentional lack of transparency. It was felt that there was a lack of clarity on the interactive relationship between the Planning Committee, the Asia Consortium, and the working groups. Questions were raised regarding, for example, the representation of Asian churches, and the number of WCRC staff on the Planning Committee. Voices were also heard of the need to note and potentially work with the 2025 celebrations of the 1700th anniversary of the first Ecumenical Council at Nicaea (refer to Drafting Report 18.05.22) and the Centennial Anniversary of the United Church of Canada. It is considered imperative that there is, within the overall identity of the organising groups, representation of young people, and the voice of women. A question regarding regional representation was also raised.

Who would you recommend to the Worship Committee and/or other working groups?

There were numerous suggestions made – the more frequent comments being the need for the diversity of the Communion to be recognized not only culturally and nationally / regionally, but also in worship tradition, style, and direction. In summary, while appreciating the richness of the Asian worship tradition, and providing a platform for the Communion to experience this, the Worship Committee should also reflect the diversity and richness of who we are as a Communion – its spirituality, presence, worship, customs, and culture. Some specific names were presented – these have been forwarded to the general secretariat.

On Member Church Engagement

In what other ways could Asian churches, along with other member churches, be engaged in the support and planning of the 2025 General Council?

Not all groups reached this question in their deliberations. In one group the issue of environmental cost and carbon footprint was again raised, with the suggestion that Asian churches could show the way to international ecumenical bodies by making the General Council 2025 a hybrid (on-site and on-line gathering), thus possibly enabling some member churches to attend virtually if otherwise unable to be present.

It was also proposed that the realization that the Asian member churches are privileged with a generally younger congregation than in many other regions they should be

encouraged to share their interpretation of faith, worship as much as possible with other member churches.

Taking into account the variety of discussions on representation and involvement, the following action is placed before the Executive for consideration:

The Executive Committee establishes a General Council Planning Committee consisting of the following members:

- **Dario Barolin (moderator)**
- **Najla Kassab**
- **Prawate Khid-arn**
- **Veronica Muchiri**
- **Gerardo Oberman (moderator of the Worship Committee)**
- **Victoria Turner**
- **Karen Georgia Thompson**
- **A representative of the Asia Consortium**
- **Collegial General Secretariat (*ex officio*)**

And with the following mandate:

The General Council Planning Committee shall be responsible for the planning of the 27th General Council to be held in Thailand in 2025. Responsibilities include working with the WCRC staff to develop a detailed programme, timetable, budget, publications, discernment processes, and symbolic events of the General Council.

The General Council Planning Committee, in consultation with the Officers' Committee, may appoint other committees, subcommittees, or working groups.

The General Council Planning Committee shall work with representatives of the host committee in Thailand and member churches in Asia to establish and assure that the Council is rooted contextually.

The General Council Planning Committee shall report regularly to both the Officers' Committee and the Executive Committee.

Conclusion

In overall summary of the Discernment Groups' discussions, a general commendation of the work was conveyed with support expressed for those involved to proceed forthwith with planning the 2025 General Council. The Executive Committee does, however, ask the Planning Committee to take into consideration the various issues raised in the Discernment Groups (as summarized above), and, in particular, sharing explanation and clarification on development of the Council's theme and of membership of the various working groups.