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Perhaps the image that best captures the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) has been the round table. It reflects the longing of concerned women to bring their voices together at a common table for dialogue leading to common action, a desire to deepen the conversation across boundaries and to learn to listen rather than simply speak. The round table invites everyone into its space as equals. It is an ecumenical space where all those at the table are welcome, and where there is always room for more people to join. At this welcoming table women theologians, women in different positions in the church and women in the pew – all the women who keep alive the faith and life of the church – are respected and valued.

The longing for solidarity which has grown among women has been one of the gifts and continuing challenges of the Decade. There have been many events, many common concerns that have transcended regional and denominational boundaries as women have drawn together for refuge. Over these ten years efforts have been made to bring women together to the round table, for dialogue and reflection on issues that concern them. These events have often been ecumenical – allowing for women to bring their varying perspectives, anxieties and visions together.

This attempt at coming to a common table is not without its difficulties. No transformation comes about without labour and pain; and if we come to the table with honesty and commitment, we must also come with the realization that this new way of being together is neither easy nor comfortable – nor should it be! The Decade has made us painfully aware of the many challenges which remain to our solidarity with each other as women. We are divided as women – and we need to face up to this and in the years beyond the Decade to work more intentionally for dialogue and reflection so that we can grow closer together.

If diversity – of culture, regional background, race and denomination – is no more than an ecumenical slogan, it will quickly be submerged.

Differences in the way we live our faith are God-given and add beauty and grace to our common witness. Regrettably, we are not always able to handle diversity. We assume that women and groups of women who do not think or act as we do are a threat and discord to our community.

In the ecumenical movement, we often speak of “ecumenical spaces”. This is about a “spirituality of connectedness”, as US theologian Letty Russell describes it. When we come to the round table we make a choice for connectedness – with God, with ourselves and with the sisters who join us there. It is the Spirit of God who moves us this way – disturbing us and the old ways in which we perceived each other and lived with each other, and yet at the same time filling us with the power of God’s unconditional love. It moves us into deeper and deeper dimensions of connectedness. This yearning for connectedness is symbolic of the deep sense we have as churches together of God’s love and hospitality towards us as children of God.

But it is possible to create ecumenical spaces only when all those who come to the table come with the confidence of their self-worth, their integrity and their spiritual strength. They come with their marvellous gifts and they offer these at the table, in faith and with hope. The challenge for all of us who come to the table is to receive each other’s gifts with grace. There is need for a prioritization of politeness, deference and sometimes silence as the basic requirements for authentic learning across boundaries of difference.

It is in this context that I would place the work that the World Council of Churches has done with Orthodox women during the course of this Decade, culminating in the two gatherings of Orthodox women in Damascus (1996) and Istanbul (1997), which are covered in this publication. It was my privilege to be part of these Orthodox women’s meetings. I learned from my Orthodox sisters what it means for us as women to love the church and to respect its great traditions and yet speak with courage and conviction when something there disturbs us. All the women I met at these meetings are indeed gifts to the ecumenical movement. The Orthodox women spoke with sensitivity and respect and yet with boldness. It taught me that women can speak from within the tradition, yet also speak to the tradition and be a part of the transformation of tradition. I thank them for all this and more!

As we grew together in mutual trust and respect, we recognized that it was all well worth the effort, as this volume will so ably demonstrate. It was important to have Dr Kyriaki Karidoyanis FitzGerald as the theological consultant to work on the content of the meetings. She brought to the process her insights and knowledge of what is the best way to gather together the theological and experiential aspects of Orthodox women in

their faith. We are grateful to her for her indispensable contribution, and I am personally thankful to her for her understanding and patience with me as we organized the events.

Holding the two meetings in two different regions was important, because this allowed us to be deeply influenced by the histories and contexts of the places and the churches where we met. Perhaps the greatest blessing of all was to have the full support of the four Patriarchs who accompanied us in the process and supported us all the way. We are grateful too for the active engagement of the churches in officially naming the women to attend. This was a sign of the respect that our Orthodox sisters receive from their churches and the genuine longing within these churches to let the women participate in discerning the signs of the times.

And so our journey together to come to the round table continues. It is not without its difficulties and challenges. It is not without its irritants and risks. But the round table signifies an open circle of love and compassion to which we hope all women will come, so that we can move forward in faith and offer to the church a new model of being the church as an embodiment of God’s love.

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