

The New Quest for Christian Unity

*Zum 70. Jahrestag der Gründung
des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen*

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As the World Council of Churches (WCC) celebrates its 70th anniversary year, we are living in a time when its purpose and objectives are relevant as never before. The many expressions of polarization, greater gaps between rich and poor, extremism and violence, concern about the future of the planet Earth, and withdrawal of accountability for our common home and future create a constant challenge to what we stand for, what we can do, and what our values and vision are.

We are living at a very dangerous time in human history. In January 2017, nuclear scientists moved the doomsday clock to two-and-a-half minutes to midnight – they saw the world almost as close to a nuclear war as in 1953 when both the Soviet Union and the United States were testing hydrogen bombs in the earth's atmosphere. The tensions around the Korean Peninsula threaten to get out of control. Moreover, the denial of global warming and its consequences, and violence and war in the Middle East and other regions, are other factors darkening the horizon of the future of humankind.

In contrast to this bleak picture, however, more and more people are waking up; they realize that this situation requires that they not remain silent bystanders, but instead express their hope for the life of God's creation through specific acts and actions turning the situation around. "But where the danger is, also grows the saving power" – this line of Friedrich Hölderlin's poem "Patmos" is not self-evident in difficult times like ours, but it is true for all those who believe in the God of life and listen to God's call and claim on their lives despite the violence and despair that surround them. Whenever and wherever we meet those who accept God's call and allow these people to motivate us, we will see the light of hope illuminating a way forward that leads to life, justice, and peace despite all obstacles.

Through the entire 70-year history of the WCC, there has been a commitment to work both for the unity of the church and for common service and witness for justice and peace in the world. Even before the WCC was established, pioneers of the ecumenical movement established the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches. When he visited the Ecumenical Centre in April 2017, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch, reminded us of the legacy pursued by his predecessors since 1920: the call for a council of churches to work for the visible unity of the church. He showed the clear connection between the quest for unity of the church and the initiatives to serve unity in the one world created by God, to care for peace, justice, and the environment. We have also faced challenges in combining the two dimensions of the WCC's purpose and identity, and we can learn a lot from different attempts to bring these two dimensions of our calling together.

Therefore, based on the historical realities in which we live, I believe that as the WCC commemorates its 70th anniversary, there is a need for a new "search for unity."

Our Call to Unity

In 2018 we look back not only to the founding of the WCC in 1948, but also to the WCC's 4th Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968. In its message, the assembly referred to the world's "diversities and tensions" and stated that "Christ wants his Church to foreshadow a renewed human community."¹ In its report on the "Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church," the assembly affirmed that the church "is bold in speaking of itself as the sign of the coming unity" of humankind.² This was later picked up in the Faith and Order study on the unity of the church and the unity of humankind,³ in which one of the clear conclusions was that the unity of the church is a sign and foretaste of the unity of humankind. Another WCC study in the 1990s – which focused on the connections between unity, justice, and peace – developed the concept of "costly unity."⁴ The call to unity is the basis for all that we do, and we have to remind ourselves continually what this calling implies in terms of commitment to really overcome our historical divisions and to work for a unity that represents both justice and peace. This is not a superficial exercise; it reaches deep into our lives and priorities. It has a price; it is costly – if we are serious.

This is not an easy task or a comfortable journey. This was a tough lesson we had to learn in the Programme to Combat Racism. The struggle against racism also became a battle within and between the churches. The racial division of human beings created in the image of God also divided the church. This is a reality of exclusion and division that is not over, and we have to be aware of how it plays out today. Not only in matters such as race, but also in those of gender, sexual orientation, and so on, we have to be aware of what these mean for our fellowship as churches. The WCC continues to address racism. It has also established a reference group on human sexuality that provides a space for the challenging conversation about how the churches deal with the many issues related to human sexuality, and how they also affect the quest for unity.

In the case of people of different identities and mixed identities, we need a framework informed by theological and biblical reflections. Churches have a contribution to make in this area based on our profound Christian belief that every human life has dignity and value that have to be protected because we are created in the image of God. Moreover, religion at its very core and nature should be life-giving and promote peace. It cannot be used to justify the violation of any part of God's creation without contradicting itself.

Following the ground-breaking convergence text on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (BEM), the Commission on Faith and Order more recently presented a second convergence text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, dealing with the fundamental ecclesiological questions that we face. This is the most comprehensive and significant common theological reflection on our understanding of the church that we have undertaken within the WCC. After sending it to member churches and ecumenical partners for study and reflection, the WCC is now receiving many responses that are being carefully analyzed by the commission. This is a major undertaking that will contribute to establishing a common basis for future dialogues and discussions in a similar way to BEM.

1 Norman Goodall (Ed.), *The Uppsala Report 1968*, Geneva 1968, 5.

2 *Ibid.*, 17.

3 Faith and Order, "Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind (1973)," in: *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963–1993*, ed. Günther Gassmann, Geneva 1993, 137–43.

4 "Costly Unity," in: *Costly Unity*, ed. T. F. Best and W. Granberg-Michaelson, Geneva 1993, 83–104.

According to the constitution and rules of the WCC, “The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.”⁵

Looking to our call to unity, I see the picture of a landscape that can be interpreted in at least two ways. From one perspective, the ecumenical movement is at a critical moment, as there are polarizing factors and anti-ecumenical dynamics in many of our churches and beyond. There is a struggle about the “soul of Christianity”: Shall we be protective or even exclusive instead of embracing the diversity given by God and pursuing ecumenical openness and common initiatives? Another perspective is that there is a stronger momentum for moving together, as pilgrims, walking together, serving and praying for the values of justice and peace as signs of the kingdom of God present among us. The issue is not the alternative between being open to the gospel or remaining faithful to the tradition of the church. It is rather whether we understand the gospel as a basis for and a corrective to the way we interpret and live within our various traditions today. There is a willingness within the fellowship of the WCC and beyond – in the Roman Catholic Church, among Evangelicals, Pentecostal churches and others – to seek a united witness and a common service, to unite our agendas and resources for those who most need our joint attention and support.

What are the different ways we are expressing our response to the call to unity in our time, particularly so that the next generations will see their way as one of dignity, joy, creativity, openness, humility, courage, and hope?

At the WCC’s 1st Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, the address by Bishop of Oslo Eivind Berggrav had the title “God Unites, the Enemy Divides.” He described how work for unity is one of the characteristics of God. He was speaking at a time when tension between the powers of the world was again visible, after two world wars, in new divisions and an Iron Curtain. Rather than focusing on who our enemies are, I think we should pay attention to the forces that make people enemies by pitting them against each other. We need to analyze how the polarizing and dividing powers that lead to conflict and war today are working against the will of God in this world.

When the WCC central committee decided on the theme of the 10th Assembly in Busan (South Korea) in 2013, there were several proposals. At the end, we discussed whether the theme we seemed to have agreed on – “God of life, lead us to justice and peace” – should include the word “unity.” After listening to the debate for a while, I recognized that the word “unity” was dividing more than it was uniting. I understood that the central committee wanted a theme and a focus that could unite us as churches and not divide us. I heard a reluctance to talk about the unity of the church – the visible unity of the church in the faith, in the sacraments, and in the ordained ministry – in spite of significant results of multilateral and bilateral dialogues.

Paradoxically, we arrived at a consensus because we refrained from using the terminology of unity. However, I remember the support I could sense when I suggested that it is prayer and the openness to seek justice and peace that are genuine expressions of our search for unity. In the statement of unity from Busan we read:

The unity of the Church, the unity of the human community and

5 “Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches, as amended by the 10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan, Republic of Korea, 2013,” in: *Encountering the God of Life. Report of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, ed. Erlinda N. Senturias and Theodore A. Gill, Jr., Geneva 2014, 425.

*the unity of the whole creation are interconnected. Christ who makes us one calls us to live in justice and peace and impels us to work together for justice and peace in God’s world. The plan of God made known to us in Christ is, in the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, “things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:9–10).*⁶

The unity of the church is to preconfigure the unity of humankind and all creatures as a planetary community in its diversity. But still, in the conflicts of our time, the dominant thinking that guides people’s action is based on the opposition of “us” and “them” in mutually exclusive ways. Searching for the visible unity of the church includes the commitment to address in mutual accountability the needs of the poor in a wide sense of the term, including the less privileged, the victims, and the oppressed.

We accept that in the WCC we do not demand consensus in all questions, and that we do not have the significant level of shared faith and order required to express our unity in Christ fully and visibly. We also have to accept that there are more issues coming forward that challenge the unity within churches and among us. Still, there is a wide and remarkable acceptance of the WCC as a platform, an ecumenical space, where we respect one another as churches and work toward more openness, accountability, and love, as expressed in our common Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

Churches are in many ways affected by the divisions of our times. In theological terms, the lack of capacity to relate to the “other” or the neighbour in responsible ways reflects the brokenness of community with the “other” and with God. Such brokenness of the most basic set of relationships is called sin in the biblical tradition. Sin is a reality that disrupts and diminishes human relationships and destroys the life given to us as human beings in God’s creation. It is a destructive reality in our own lives. To build up our lives and new relationships, a kind of conversion toward the other is needed – a new, more inclusive understanding of identity that includes the material, moral, and spiritual dimensions of life.

Growing Together in Mutual Accountability

Twenty years ago, the WCC’s 8th Assembly received the statement “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches” as a significant milestone in an ongoing journey of self-reflection on the nature and purpose of the ecumenical movement in general, and the WCC in particular. This included the affirmation that member churches, by their mutual engagement in the WCC, open themselves to be challenged by one another to deeper, more costly ecumenical commitment, something the statement described as mutual accountability taking many forms: recognizing their solidarity with each other, assisting each other in cases of need, refraining from actions incompatible with brotherly and sisterly relations, entering into spiritual relationships to learn from each other, and consulting with each other “to learn of the Lord Jesus Christ what witness he would have them to bear to the world in his name.”⁷

Mutual accountability is a central attitude that has brought the ecumenical movement to life as a fellowship of churches, as I have tried to demonstrate in my book *The Truth We Owe Each Other: Mu-*

6 “God’s Gift and Call to Unity – and Our Commitment,” Unity Statement adopted by the WCC 10th Assembly on 8 November 2013, in: Senturias and Gill, eds., *Encountering the God of Life*, 40.

7 “The Common Understanding and Vision Document,” ER 51, 1999, 100.

*tual Accountability in the Ecumenical Movement.*⁸ Mutual accountability is exercised when we ask and respond to each other in a transparent, open, humble, and constructive way regarding what we have done with our common legacy as churches, with the gospel, and with the one tradition of the church.

The attitude of “mutual accountability” is in my view absolutely basic in the biblical understanding of the church (see the image of the body of Christ and the call to accountability to one another in all the letters of the New Testament dealing with ecclesial questions). Mutual accountability is significant in the ecumenical movement because it focuses on what we all can contribute to unity, and how the common efforts to express unity in diversity must also have a strong dimension of binding, accountable relationships. I find that the best ways of nurturing structures and attitudes of mutual accountability toward the unity of the church is found in the WCC and in other conciliar forms of working together.

Mutual accountability refers here to an attitude and form for our life together, trusting the power of the gospel to address the needs we all have of liberation from the powers of sin and for the transformation into the life and the values of the kingdom of God. The just and inclusive community of women and men, adults and children, people of different identities and mixed identities must be addressed as a genuine issue of the unity we are calling for and of our mutual accountability. This is indeed an expression of the connection between the unity of the church and the unity of humankind. We are reminded: “A true community of women and men is God’s gift and promise for humanity, which is created ‘in God’s image’ – male and female (Gen 1:27); and the church, as prophetic sign of that which God desires for women and men, is called to embody that community in its own life.”⁹

As we continue our pilgrimage together in 2018, 20 years after the commemoration of the end of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988–1998), we celebrate the gift of our unity against gender-based violence through the Thursdays in Black campaign. Although this intergenerational campaign has become a significant symbolic action against rape and violence, we need to develop it further so that we have more concrete follow-up in building proper attitudes and in advocacy work in the international and national arenas.

Mutual accountability involves dialogue about how we deal with the differences and divisions that have developed, and how we are stewards of this legacy. We need to ask, as well, how we are mutually accountable to the values and knowledge that we affirm and share, and how we, therefore, engage each other in finding a way forward together. We need to show that we are accountable, reliable, and honest. In all of this, we are mutually accountable to how the gospel is shared – so that those addressed by the gospel can receive it as the word of

liberation, transformation, and hope that the holy scripture brings to the church and the world in every generation and in every context.

What does it mean and require today to be together on the way following Christ, looking for signs of God’s reign to come, and discerning the way guided by the Holy Spirit, and to do all this in mutual accountability? What does this mean in a multi-cultural and multi-religious context, in which the strong self-interests of individuals, groups, and nations block necessary change and fuel conflict and war to the detriment of human communities and all life on planet Earth? In short, what does it mean to be on a pilgrimage of justice and peace in today’s world, together with people of good will of different cultures and faith communities? I have asked myself this question every day as general secretary of the WCC since the 10th Assembly 2013 in Busan called churches and all people of good will to join in transformative action on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

My question is about the kind of renewal of churches and theology that is required today in view of the threats to life and survival that humankind is facing. My ecumenical experience tells me that there is no single answer or ready-made solution at hand. No one alone has the full picture. Indeed, we urgently need to understand just what is required of us to be on the way of justice and peace as a diverse community in mutual accountability, and what the core of our Christian faith can contribute in responding to the main challenges we face together as human beings on the way.

At stake is our commitment to basic values that can come from a deeper understanding of God’s call to unity for humankind; a call to unity in diversity but in just peace, not only within and for one group, one people, or one religion, but for all. We have to continue to work and pray that faith in one God will – one day – bring another type of relations of justice and peace. This day should come soon, before it is too late.

I hope that as we continue our journey toward the WCC’s 11th Assembly, we will not shy away from reflections on our call to call one another to unity, even if at the moment we are not able to fulfil some of the aspirations and hopes for full, visible, ecclesial unity. I believe, though, that coming generations will be asking more for the expressions of unity in diversity, shaping the churches’ contribution to more justice, more peace, more unity in a highly polarized, unjust, but also more interconnected world. The relevance of the WCC will not decrease but increase as an instrument for setting new agendas and bringing new ideas and initiatives that can bring real hope to the world.

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8 Olav Fykse Tveit, *The Truth We Owe Each Other*, Geneva 2016.

9 “Report of the Report Committee” (WCC 7th Assembly, Canberra, 1991), ER 43, 1991, 271.