



Welcome to the Ecumenical Centre



World Council
of Churches

Entrance Hall Reception

Start at the architectural model of the Ecumenical Centre.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded in 1948, and its first offices were on the other side of Lake Geneva. But as the WCC expanded, these offices soon became too small, so an exchange was negotiated with the Canton of Geneva of the land on which the centre now sits for the villa and land that the WCC previously occupied on the Route de Malagnou. This new site was and still is an ideal location given the proximity to many international organizations, such as the UN, the International Labour Office, the World Health Organization, the World Intellectual Property Organization and the Red Cross. Henry Knox Sherrill, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA, raised the money to build the Ecumenical Centre, with co-financing from the Lutheran World Federation.

The Ecumenical Centre was designed by Geneva architects Henri Lesemann and the Honegger Brothers (students of the famous Swiss architect Le Corbusier) in the early sixties and was officially inaugurated at the WCC central committee meeting in July 1965. The simple design included three wings, which were named after the geographical features visible from the building: the Jura Mountains, the River Rhone, and Lake Geneva. A fourth wing, "Salève" (the pre-alpine mountain to the southwest of central Geneva), was added later when the

WCC expanded. The Ecumenical Centre houses the general secretariat and most programme staff of the WCC and has office space for about 350 persons. The building hosts different church organizations, ecumenical bodies, and international organizations, among



them the Lutheran World Federation, the World Student Christian Federation, ACT Alliance, ECLOF, and the liaison offices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Moscow. Over time, the staff complement of some of the

organizations in the centre reduced, creating space for many smaller bodies and organizations, not necessarily church-related, to call the Ecumenical Centre their home.





Reception area **1**

Cabinets **2**

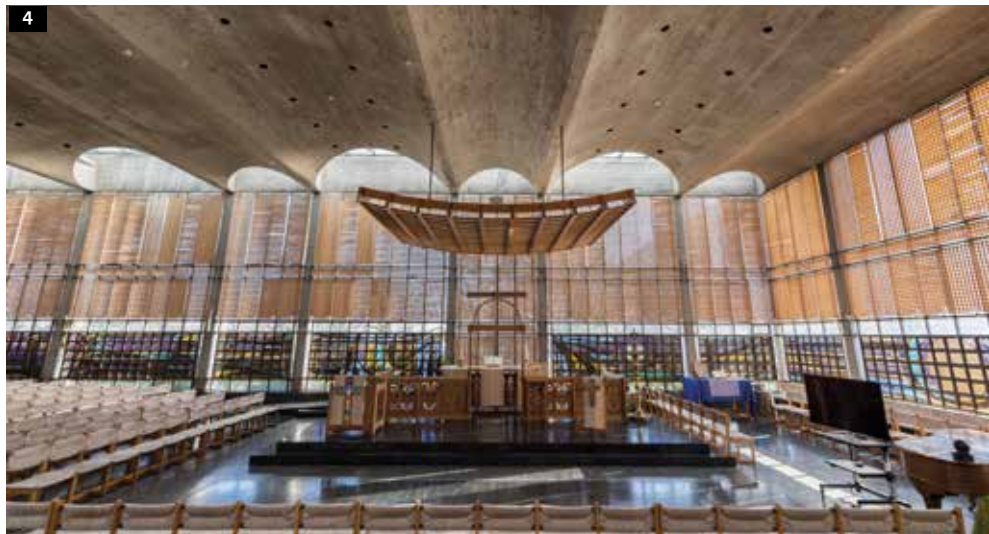
These display cabinets contain gifts received from churches all over the world.



Panel Listing WCC Member Churches **3**

The floor-to-ceiling panel lists the member churches of the WCC – Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Reformed, among others – which at present account for about 580 million Christians around the world. Originally, 147 member churches participated in the WCC's 1st Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948.





The Chapel 4

The chapel is the spiritual heart and soul of the Ecumenical Centre, where individuals and groups from many different traditions and cultures regularly assemble for prayer. The chapel is an inter-confessional space that sustains prayer life at ecumenical events as well as in observing significant days of prayer. The prayers use different languages in order to remind us that each language, culture, and tradition is one among many others, and the enrichment received from one another in the worldwide ecumenical fellowship is due to this diversity. Local churches in Geneva also use the chapel for worship, including during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Inside, the chapel symbolizes a tent; the waves in the ceiling suggest the wind blowing across the roof of a tent. The chapel is a reminder that although we have not yet reached

full fellowship, the churches are on a pilgrimage toward unity.

Both the architect, Eric Möller, and the interior designer, Knud Lollesgaard, came from Denmark and used Nordic furnishings and natural materials in the design of the chapel. The abstract stained glass windows show the rising and the setting of the sun around the world – the whole inhabited earth, the *oikoumene*. The colours are representative of “nature’s own colours,” according to Lollesgaard. The wooden oak panels on the glass windows filter the light but also allow the outside world to be seen, God’s creation: nature, trees, people, movement. Occasionally one can hear the wood as it shrinks or swells. One is not cut off from the outside world inside the chapel.





Mosaic of the Baptism of Christ **5**

Entering the chapel, you walk across waves in the marble floor symbolizing the waters of baptism. Though the churches are not united, Christians share this bond of unity as we are baptized in the name of Christ and not as members of particular church traditions. On the wall on the righthand side there is a mosaic depicting the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan, where the waves of the Jordan seem to continue the waves on the floor. The original of the mosaic dates to the 11th century and still adorns the ceiling of a monastery in Daphne, Greece. This copy was a gift of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the inauguration of the Ecumenical Centre in 1965.

Altar

The chapel was originally designed and built along Reformed lines with no ornaments, but with the WCC including more Orthodox churches after its assembly in New Delhi in 1961, the Church of Greece offered **the iconostasis**. **6**

The iconostasis is the sandalwood framework around the altar, which was added in 1972. It is a copy of the first Christian iconostasis in Greece. The original, in marble, dates to the 4th century, and its remnants can be found in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens. In Orthodox tradition the door of the iconostasis is opened only during the eucharist and only the priests are allowed into the chancel. However, this iconostasis has a permanently open door.



The glass and wood canopy over the altar area, recalling an Asian design, is intended to diffuse the light and reflect sound.

The large wooden cross placed behind the altar is four metres high – the cross is the main symbol of our faith.

Wooden Crosses from Latin America:

The “María Cristina Gómez” cross **7** is from El Salvador. It is decorated with scenes of daily life – a mother with her child, a school teacher, someone working in the fields and picking fruit. María Cristina Gómez was a

Baptist primary school teacher and community leader in El Salvador who was abducted in front of hundreds of witnesses in 1989 and subsequently murdered. She was the founder of a women’s organization, addressing issues that affect all poor women in El Salvador: domestic violence, rape, and lack of education.

“The Cross of the New Creation” **8**

This South American cross, presented to the Lutheran World Federation, depicts the crucified Christ surrounded by images of the new creation described in the final book of the Bible. Nature is transformed as the Holy Spirit descends upon the gathered peoples drawn from every nation, ethnicity, and language.





Coptic icon **9**

On the right side of the altar you will see an icon of the Mother of God, a gift of the Coptic Church of Egypt. The left-hand side of the icon portrays the flight of the holy family to Egypt, while the right-hand side depicts St Bishop carrying the Christ child on his shoulder.



The Icon of the Trinity **10**

In front of the iconostasis there is a small copy of the famous icon painted around 1410 by the Russian monk Andrei Rublev. He portrayed the relationship among the three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – by depicting them as the three angelic visitors who broke bread with Abraham and Sarah under the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18).



Oil Lamp from India **11**

This traditional oil lamp made of brass is lit during times of prayer as a sign of God's light. The Indian member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) presented it to the LWF at its 1997 Assembly in Hong Kong. The cross on the top emerges from a lotus flower, an important symbol in Indian culture where images of gods in temples may be found sitting amid lotus flowers.

Please walk to the side altar.

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This altar was added after the chapel was built and is mainly used for morning prayers.

The Cross of Reconciliation 12

This cross, the main focus of the side altar, is made out of fragments from bombs that during the Second World War targeted two European cities, Dresden in Germany and Coventry in England. After the war, these two cities became twin cities. Pieces from the bombs were collected in these two cities and put together in the form of a cross to serve as a symbol of reconciliation and renewal. It shows how people have come together, creating a symbol of hope out of the weapons of war. For our work here in the Ecumenical Centre this cross is a constant reminder that we shall never be able to build a common future if

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we have not been able to reconcile our pasts.

Crucifixion 13

Offered as a gift by Pope Francis when visiting the WCC in June 2018, "Crucifixion" was produced in 1990 by internationally renowned sculptor Alberto Ghinzani from Pavia in Italy. Made from a single piece of bronze, the sculpture appears to represent the crucified Jesus but on closer examination depicts a figure distraught with pain without a beard or a crown of thorns. The sculpture is said to allude to slavery and physical and moral exploitation. It was given to the WCC by Pope Francis with the hope that all "should make an effort to rescue the marginalized from the drift of misery so as to restore them to their true dignity."



Stone from Lausanne Cathedral 14

At the side of the altar, there is a stone from Lausanne Cathedral. It was presented to the WCC in 2002 by the churches of the Canton of Vaud on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the First World Conference on Faith and Order, which took place in August 1927 in Lausanne. It represents one of the foundations of the ecumenical movement: profound multilateral dialogue. The verse from 1 Peter 2 encourages us to be living stones in the ecumenical movement and our churches.

The Stoning of St Stephen 15

This icon, painted on wood by Romanian nuns, portrays the stoning of St Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7). Two people are throwing stones at St Stephen. On the right hand Saul/Paul can be seen. He has no stones in his hands, yet he does nothing to prevent the violence. This icon was painted specifically for the WCC for the service to launch the Decade to Overcome Violence in 2001 at the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin. This church, badly



damaged in a bombing raid during the Second World War, was rebuilt after 1959. During the service in Berlin, people were given small bullet crosses from an Lutheran World Federation project in Liberia.

The Organ 16

The organ is a gift of the churches in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). In the early sixties, the churches did not have access to convertible currency but wanted to make a contribution to the Ecumenical Centre. They therefore organized a collection among their members. With this money the organ was built in Potsdam, brought in pieces to Geneva and assembled by workers from the GDR.

Musical Instruments 17

In addition to the organ there are various musical instruments – a large Indonesian brass gong, drums from Africa and Brazil, flutes, and string and rhythmical instruments from different continents. They are presents from different churches and used in prayer services.



As you move back towards the entrance of the Chapel, you will see:

The “Power of Prayer” Statue 18 It was created by an artist from the Georgian Orthodox Church to commemorate the 1985 peace talks between the general secretary of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev and the president of the USA Ronald Reagan. The first summit meeting was held here in Geneva. Four identical figures were given by the Orthodox Church of Georgia to Reagan and Gorbachev, the WCC, and the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA.

Small Wooden African Cross 19
A gift from the Congo.





Icon from the Third European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu in 2007 – “The Light of Christ shines upon all”

This icon is from Romania and painted on glass. It represents Jesus and the angels carrying censers.

There is another small icon of Slavonic tradition **21** representing Jesus. In this tradition, the red colour is a symbol of the resurrection.

Patchwork Quilt “Journey to Peace”

The quilt was commissioned by the WCC for the 2011 International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) in Jamaica, marking the culmination of the Decade to Overcome Violence. The artist, Deborah Stockdale from the USA, was inspired by photographs of the colours and shapes in the chapel’s stained-glass windows. The quilt depicts the journey to peace, through people getting out of a boat to walk on the water, wild geese flying as symbols of the Holy Spirit, as well as the symbol of the IEPC.





The Lund Cross 23

A Salvadoran cross, created for the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation in Lund in 2016, was placed in the chapel of the Ecumenical Centre in January 2018. The cross, a symbol of this milestone in ecumenical relations, is rich with symbols and shows a baptismal font, branches of the true vine, and Jesus inviting people of all nations to share bread and wine. The cross was painted by Lutheran artist Christian Chavarria Ayala from El Salvador.



Atrium

The main item in the atrium is the **African cross** ²⁴ from the WCC's 8th Assembly held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1998. The wooden cross was the centrepiece in the prayer tent. The wood comes from old railway ties. Forced labour in railway projects in Africa was considered to be a symbol of enslavement at the time of colonization, and the artist was inspired to use these old sleepers for the cross. Images on the cross depicts the suffering and joy of the African continent, such as child soldiers and work in the fields.



Shona Stone Sculpture ²⁵
Just in front of the entrance into the Visser 't Hooft Hall, there is a statue of an African woman in prayer, turning her head toward God. This recalls the theme of the Harare assembly: "Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope." It was presented to the WCC by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches. The closed forms of the woman's arms and legs also look like links in a chain. Thus the statue can be considered the body of Africa - in chains for many centuries, but still unbroken, upright, and trusting in God.





Tapestry from the Pacific Region 26

Placed in the atrium outside the Ecumenical Centre's main hall, is a tapestry from Tonga made from the bark of a tree.

Nestorian Stele 27

This stele depicts a rubbing made from the surface of an ancient black marble monument commemorating the Nestorian mission to China. Inscriptions in Syriac and Chinese tell of Nestorian and Assyrian evangelists spreading the Christian gospel. The stele stands in Xi'an and has been traced back to the 8th century (approx. 781 CE). Christianity was spread along the Silk Road by Nestorian missionaries but

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declined with the Mongolian invasion. Above the text, the adorned cross stands on a lotus flower.

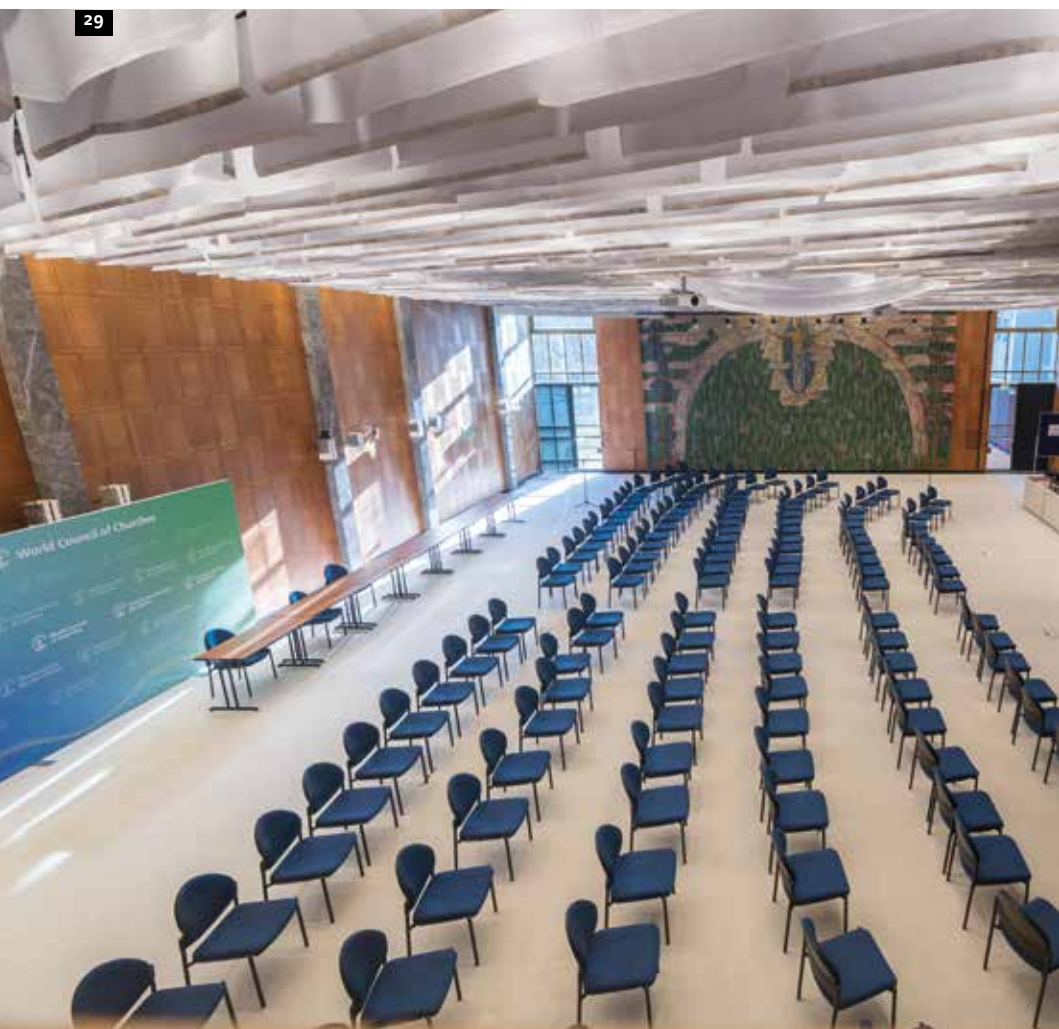
In the Reading Room, just off the Atrium, can be found this **bust of Martin Luther** 28 as a young monk. It presented to the WCC by the German Democratic Republic in 1983 during the celebrations to mark the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth.



Visser 't Hooft Hall (Main Hall) 29

The furnishings and tapestry in the hall were a gift from Clarence Dillon, from the US, in memory of his wife Anne Douglass Dillon, who died in 1961. The hall is named after the first general secretary of the WCC Rev. Dr Willem A. Visser 't Hooft. The wood on the walls comes from a four-ton mahogany log

sent by member churches in Ghana who were unable to send any money but wished to make a contribution to the Ecumenical Centre. With this gift of mahogany wood, it was possible to furnish the walls of the main hall as well as some of the smaller meeting rooms.



Tapestry 30

The tapestry on the main wall represents the prayer of Christ “that they may all be one” (John 17:21) with the Greek inscription. It was designed by the Swedish artist Einar Forseth and was especially woven for this hall in Aubusson, France.

The tapestry depicts Christ in his glory with the Holy Spirit represented as a dove. The fig and the grapevine refer to the Old Testament and the rainbow to God’s unending covenant. Jesus holds out his arms toward the different churches representing our different church traditions and regions of the world. The images do not depict actual churches except for the one in the lower right-hand corner, which portrays the church in Pennsylvania, US, in which Anne and Clarence Dillon were married.



“Breath of God” Ceiling 31

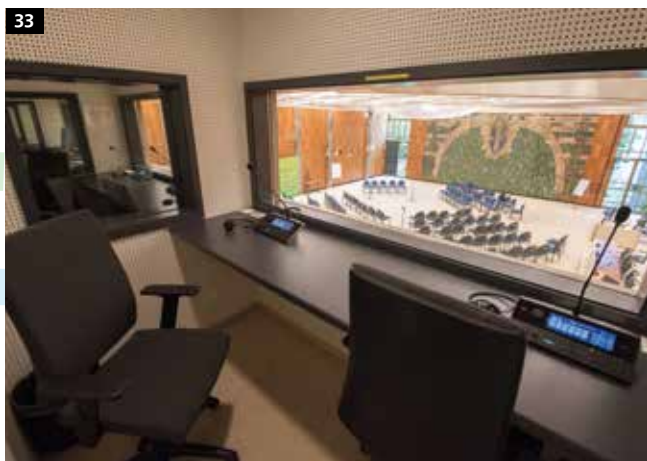
Before the renovation of the Visser 't Hooft Hall in 2009/2010, there was no natural light in this room. Renovation needed to be carried out, taking into account the different requirements of the Geneva Heritage Authority and Geneva fire regulations. Sprinklers had to be installed to protect the tapestry in case of a fire. A Swiss artist, Etienne Krähenbühl from Yverdon, was invited to design something to hide those installations. He came up with an artwork made of non-flammable paper which he first called “The breath of God.” The artist also refers to it as “un ange qui passe” (an angel passing by).



Stand in the middle of the room 32 and look at the ceiling imagining that you are at the bottom of Lake Geneva looking up. You will see a circle representing the bottom of the ecumenical boat.



Before leaving the room do not forget to look up at the interpretation booths 33 above the doors. Many of the meetings that are held in the Ecumenical Centre take place in more than one language.



If you leave the Visser 't Hooft Hall and move across the atrium, a **plaque** **34** on the opposite wall commemorates the WCC's Programme to Combat Racism and its first director, Boudewijn Sjollemma from the Netherlands.

Also on display at the Ecumenical Centre is a **Middle Eastern tapestry**. **35** Embroidered by Palestinian refugee women at Al-Badia workshop in Beirut, 2010.

This wall-hanging was designed by Farah Munayyer and inspired by Al-Khalil dresses and headscarves – and required four women two years to complete. It was donated anonymously in appreciation of the WCC's efforts to foster justice for the Palestinian people and peace for Palestine and Israel.

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A bust of Nathan Söderblom 36

The Lutheran Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931), former Archbishop of Uppsala, Sweden, pioneered the idea of a World Council of Churches as early as 1919. He was directly involved in the ecumenical movements that led to the establishment of the WCC, such as the World Student Christian Federation, Life and Work, and Faith and Order and is particularly remembered for his work on the 1925 Stockholm Conference. He was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 1930.

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Outside the Ecumenical Centre

The *Oikoumene* Symbol 37

Located on the front lawn of the Ecumenical Centre is an abstract version of the *oikoumene* symbol – a boat representing the church with a cross as a mast – created for the WCC at its 4th Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968.

Pieces of the Berlin Wall 38

In the garden at the back of the Ecumenical Centre were two fragments of the Berlin Wall – a gift of the churches in Berlin to the Conference of European Churches. They are a symbolic witness to the efforts made during the Cold War by CEC in particular and the ecumenical



movement in general to maintain links between the Christians in East and West and support the struggle of the churches to break down all walls dividing humankind. They are in storage during the building operations.

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The Green Village 39

The Green Village is a new development concept of the WCC's estate in Geneva on which the Ecumenical Centre stands: it will include a renovated Ecumenical Centre, as well as new office space for commercial and civil society organizations, including the WCC, its sister organizations, and tenants, and residential buildings. Construction began in 2019.

The Green Village is a unique, innovative and sustainable project, addressing ecological concerns and creating a neighbourhood for now and for the future. Geothermal energy will be used for heating and cooling. Solar panels on the roofs will be connected to the main electricity grid and produce electricity for the Green Village buildings.

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Reflecting the values of our being together, a Promenade of Peace will run through the Green Village as a symbol of dialogue and understanding. In essence, the concept of the Green Village is based on respecting the planet and trying to apply the WCC's values of care for creation.





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