

## CHURCH OF NORWAY GENERAL SYNOD, 4 APRIL 2014

### **Address from Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches**

#### **FREE TO SPEAK, BELIEVE AND SERVE**

THANK YOU! It's a great honour to have been asked to speak at the General Synod in conjunction with the 200th anniversary of the Norwegian constitution. The anniversary represents an important milestone for Norway as a nation – and for the Church of Norway.

It gives me particular pleasure to stand here as a representative of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the worldwide fellowship that the Church of Norway has belonged to since 1948. The WCC has many reasons to be grateful to the Church of Norway. That gratitude also extends to Norwegian Church Aid, the Christian Council of Norway and other Christian groups here in Norway, as well as to the Norwegian state. For many years Norway has used its freedom and its resources in a variety of ways to support other people in their struggles for freedom and peace. One of those ways is through the WCC, ever since the late Bishop Eivind Berggrav, a Norwegian Lutheran church leader, helped to found the WCC at its first assembly in Amsterdam.

In November 2013 we held the WCC 10th assembly, in Busan, Korea. The theme of the assembly, "God of life: lead us to justice and peace", brought us directly to today's subject of faith and freedom, which was illuminated from a number of interesting angles. In the weeks leading up to the assembly I visited both North and South Korea, which gave me a better insight into what it is like to live in a divided country where these kinds of questions are a matter of life and death. Promoting unity within the Church, unity between people and unity with the creation are inextricably linked, because they all relate to the fellowship that the God of life created us for. That is the conclusion of the new declaration on unity in the church. According to many veteran delegates, the assembly in Busan was one of the most unifying ones ever to have been held. It set out a common way forward – for the churches, for WCC staff and for the newly elected Central Committee headed by Agnes Aboum from Kenya. The assembly is the best place for Christians to meet and discuss what it means to follow Jesus in our day and age. That is how Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, summed it up in a letter he sent to me after the event.

The Church of Norway had a very capable and proactive delegation, led by *praeses* Helga Haugland Byfuglien, ably prepared and supported by Berit Hagen Agøy – general secretary of the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations – and her staff. Together with a number of other advisers and observers at the assembly, the Church of Norway made valuable contributions that were taken notice of. There was particular recognition for its willingness to follow up decisions relating to areas such as unity and diakonia, as well as Christian campaigns for justice and peace.

Let me take this opportunity to express my personal, warm thanks for the prayer that was said for the ecumenical work that we do, as well as for me and my service. Humbly I ask you to continue to pray for us.

Above all we should thank God for the service that we are able to perform for the fellowship represented by the World Council of Churches.

## 1. FREE – a powerful word for nations, peoples, individuals and churches

Free.

It is a powerful word. It can be the word that keeps a person or an ethnic group or a nation state going. Liberation is about change and fellowship, about dynamism and solidarity: “We shall overcome”!

Free is the word that gives you hope that you can stay where you are – in peaceful and meaningful interaction with other people. It is much more than just the principle that you can do what you like. Without freedom, the fair distribution of wealth and equal rights, fellowship becomes oppressive and life stagnates, while growth and development are stunted. Freedom requires relationships to be both voluntary and mutually binding.

In order to be free in the present, you must come to terms with both the past and the future. Some things we have to put behind us. Other things will have to change in the future.

In many churches in villages along the Norwegian coast, there is a ship hanging from the ceiling. The WCC’s logo is also a boat and a cross. Christian faith is about the freedom to set our course, together, because we are all in the same boat. That is perhaps the dream that lies behind today’s theme: Free to speak, believe and serve.

It is what Luther so brilliantly captured in his thoughts on Christian liberty. Christians are simultaneously free people, subject to no-one, and servants to all people. It is hard to imagine a better way of putting it.

200 years ago Norwegians discovered – or at least an elite group of them did – that you could be “free”. In the space of a short time they were able to establish a Norwegian constitution, a Norwegian parliament, the rule of law and a new and more accountable system of government, based on the power of the people, on popular sovereignty. “Free” has been a powerful word for periods of the intervening 200 years. Sometimes it has united us, in times of want, uncertainty and war. “Today the flagpole is naked, amongst Eidsvoll’s budding trees, but this is the very hour, we know what freedom is.” (Nordahl Grieg: “17th of May 1940”). Today Norway is a free and wealthy nation, at peace with its neighbours. It is both an honour and a pleasure to be a Norwegian serving in an international organisation – to come from a country that is considered one of the best and most reliable partners when other countries and peoples are suffering from lack of freedom, conflicts, poverty and injustice.

This 200th anniversary can probably help us to see the value of our own freedom, and to realize how much of the world cannot take freedom for granted. But 1814 didn’t give everyone freedom, either. The phrase “Norway’s free men” tells us a lot about who wasn’t free. The role of the Church and its officials in 1814 was probably not unambiguously positive. Few people in 1814, even after the 17th of May, enjoyed the kind of individual freedoms that

many people think, talk and dream about in our day and age. Only 25% of Norwegian adults could participate in political elections in the period following 1814. In spite of the constitution being liberal, the Sámi people and other minorities had to wait a long, long time to achieve their constitutional rights – the freedom to have their own identity, with its own language and culture. Large groups of people were excluded from the new rights and responsibilities of citizens (the poor, peasants and women). Some were not even allowed to enter the kingdom (Jews and Jesuits). For a long time Norwegian laws denied so-called “dissenters” freedom of belief and of assembly, denied homosexual men and women the right to live in loving relationships and permitted abuse and discrimination against certain groups of people and individuals. And to some extent the Church supported and participated in this. Many of these things have now been put right. The Church – including the General Synod – has confronted some of these issues. Many important changes have been made, but further changes will be required.

An anniversary like this is a time to show our gratitude and to reflect on the inter-relationship between political and socio-economic conditions and rights, and on the key role of the constitution as an expression of our shared values.

Free to speak, believe and serve. It is a good theme for the Church of Norway’s contribution to the anniversary of the constitution, and one that describes the position of the Church itself. The most fundamental changes to the constitution probably took place in 2012, when the articles regulating the relationship between the Church of Norway and the state were amended. We appear to have convinced our members that the Church remains the same, although its formal role has changed. It is good to tie up some loose ends, and to bring a discussion that has lasted for around 150 years to a conclusion. The constitution of 1814 was inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment, which amongst other things put an end to the notion that kings rule by divine right.

In 2012 this process of what one might call secularisation was taken a step further. The state doesn’t govern the Church; the Church doesn’t bind the state. Now this has happened, although there remains a lot of work to be done on finding the best ways of allocating responsibility, and of emphasising the unique position of Jesus Christ’s church. But these questions will no doubt be resolved.

This year’s theme encourages us to look forward, to answer an even bigger question, which I consider to be implicit in a number of the items on the agenda for this General Synod: What should the Church of Norway be, with its new status and role, 200 years after the constitution was written, both today and into the future? And the answer is: Free to speak, believe and serve.

The Church has a role to play in the public debate on the nature of good, proper and true freedom, and on what belongs in a free democracy based on Christian and humanist values. That’s why even a General Synod must discuss the state, society and individuals, and must ask how each person can be free – to speak, believe and serve, here and elsewhere in the world. These questions have been raised in many important discussions and decisions at the General Synod, such as the ones on protecting the creation and on the Church’s duty to participate in the worldwide fellowship of churches and its joint mission, as well as in this year’s important discussion about human rights.

If there is anything that we can say with great certainty, based on scripture and tradition, it is that the Church should liberate people. Liberate them by granting forgiveness for their sins. Liberate them to live with each other, not in isolation, but together, based on mutual trust and support. Liberate them to be themselves and to meet the challenges that life sets them, looking always to the future, and to search for the right way forward with hope and confidence.

Let's dig a little deeper into Holy Scripture, to look more closely at what churches can do together to find this way forward.

## 2. Free pilgrims on the path to justice and peace

Since you have asked me to contribute to the Church's thoughts and input on this historic moment for the country and its people, I will explore how the theme for this anniversary relates to the vision for cooperation between the world's churches through the World Council of Churches over the coming years: A pilgrimage of justice and peace.

As a pilgrim, whether in a physical or spiritual sense, you free yourself from many of the things that you cannot, or do not need to, bring with you. You need the freedom to distinguish between the big and small things, to focus on what is really important. As Paul says: "For God's Kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of the righteousness, peace, and joy which the Holy Spirit gives" (Romans 14:17).

To be a pilgrim is to travel towards what is holy. That can mean travelling to a holy place, where a holy woman or man lived, or where they did or said something that is valuable and inspiring for later generations. Perhaps the person is buried there. It can also mean wandering through the countryside or through towns and villages. Places where life unfolds, as created by holy God, visible to those who travel through them.

To be a pilgrim on the path to what is holy can also mean going on a journey of change, confronting yourself, and asking how you can live a life that is a truer expression of what is good and holy. How can our day-to-day lives "be a reflection of Heaven"? (That is how it is expressed in one of Norway's best-known psalms, which developed this pilgrim motif long before it once again became fashionable in Norway: "Always walking boldly on, wherever God shall lead you.")

How can we be free Christians, travelling towards what is holy? The two things are closely related. When seeking what is holy, you seek what is good, what God wants; justice and peace. This is nowhere more apparent than in the Lord's Prayer, the prayer which binds all Christians together, each day, in all countries, across generations and confessions. It expresses the core essence of the life of a pilgrim on the path to what is holy: Hallowed be Your name. We are on our way to the kingdom of God, and we ask that it be revealed to us now, through good being done: Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us what we need on our journey, for the next stage: Give us this day our daily bread. And liberate us from the things that weigh us down, that hold us back: And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Show us a path that we are capable of following, in spite of our limitations: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. The perspective is one of

time and eternity, respectfully trusting in God, who is like a mother and father to all of his creation: For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. When we say the prayer that Jesus taught us at ecumenical events, we often say: let us pray in the language in which we first learnt the prayer. Our mother tongue is often the language of our hearts.

But there is another dimension to holiness that we mustn't forget about when we ask ourselves where we are heading. We can lose our way if in freely seeking out what is holy and best by going to holy places, we focus too much on history, on institutions and on hierarchies. Or if we seek the holy life, we can become too focused on ourselves, on our faults or our virtues, in a way that becomes self-justification.

According to the Gospel of St. Matthew, Jesus called on his disciples to follow him on his pilgrimage, not just to accompany him to Jerusalem, and to learn from his teachings and through experience. The disciples had to be willing to follow him on his journey towards holiness, which would end in tragedy – a tragedy that they themselves would be implicated in.

Christian theology has always been, and will always be, a theology of the cross, where God fights against sin, dissimulation, falsehood, abuse of power and injustice right to the very end, to the most humiliating death. It is also in the face of the crucified Christ that we see what is most holy in this world: God suffering for the sins and errors of the world, in order to free us from their power and this fate, in complete solidarity with victims and those who suffer injustice.

His path leads through death, to an open grave, but then – back to Galilee, and with a clear message: Go out! That is the path for those who follow Christ. Go out to the people in need of this message, and to those in need of fellow human beings to preach this liberating faith and trust in the Holy Trinity; go out baptising, teaching and inviting others in, in order to spread freedom.

That is why God does not get lost in suffering, but rather God is with the victims of malice, the sick, those in prison and the hungry or thirsty. After all, Jesus says that is where we will find him, often without realising it (Matthew 25). The suffering, crucified God is an unusual, almost unbelievable, image of God. But there is probably nothing that more clearly gives hope to those who are suffering, to the victims of war and injustice.

It is in the suffering faces of the other that we encounter what is holy, according to the Jewish philosopher Levinas. Also when we know that our lives are at risk, or where God creates free and loving relationships between us. That is why pilgrims for justice and peace must always travel to places that many people would think are not worth visiting at all. Probably some of them are very close to you. Everywhere people struggle with life, with themselves, with injustice, with sickness, with loneliness and with death.

As pilgrims we must therefore ask to be shown the way forward, ask with humility and trust, and be willing to confront ourselves and change.

We are not asking in a vacuum. We are asking in the context of a specific Norwegian history, and specific challenges relating to society and religion in Norway, now and in the future. You are discussing a number of those challenges here. We are asking within a society that has become secular, both formally through the separation of religion and state, and in the sense that there are fewer and perhaps fainter signs that the Church's Christian faith influences the thoughts and deeds of many people. We are asking within a world where people have already

been forced to leave their worldly possessions behind due to climate change. We are speaking within a society and a world of broken relationships and with an uncertain future. We are asking in a world where born and unborn lives are threatened. We are asking in a world where men and women, adults and children, often have unequal rights. We are asking as part of a worldwide, ecumenical fellowship of churches, who share a faith and a way of life.

The WCC's most recent document on mission, "Together towards life", which the General Synod discussed in detail last year, looks precisely at how mission is not just a movement from a centre of power to the periphery and to the marginalised, but is equally a movement from the periphery, with the marginalised acting as agents of mission. The fact is, of course, that belief in both God and freedom can be just as strong amongst people who are considered "marginalised". Consciously choosing the perspective of the poor and under-privileged as one's main perspective helps us to explore the question of economic justice and to understand the nature of human solidarity in its widest sense. This perspective is both theologically and politically necessary. It is the marginalised, underprivileged and vulnerable, the victims of violence and discrimination, the poor and the oppressed, who are in the best position to see whether the Church is genuinely standing up for freedom and justice and peace and joy for everyone.

Or as the new pope has indicated by taking the name of Francis, in his speeches, and in his private words to me recently: We must reach out, go forth to where people are, where life is. That is where Christ is. And we have the best message to bring. He thought that focusing on a pilgrimage for justice and peace was a good idea. We have "The Joy of the Gospel", as he called his important exhortation for reform published last year. Freedom and joy go hand in hand.

(I just heard that the new President of the World Bank wants to use the ecumenical slogan "a preferential option for the poor" as a guiding principle for the Bank's work over the coming years, and to cooperate closely with faith-based organisations to build consensus around this. I am meeting him in June to discuss how the WCC can contribute.)

## 2. Freedom in Christian faith

It is right and proper for the Church of Norway to use this opportunity to pause for reflection and to ask itself how it can use its freedom to promote freedom. How can we – in what one might call a post-secular phase – rediscover the importance of faith in God to our own freedom, and that of others.

What happened in 1814 was the start of a movement – a journey, if you like – towards a new kind of justice and a new peace, a just peace. It was also a crisis of trust. Claus Pavels' sermon in Akershus Castle Church on 25 February 1814, which has been published for this anniversary, clearly shows that. The Danish king, who was the highest political authority in Norway, had not only ended up on the losing side of a war that Norway had no part in, he had also given Norway to the Swedish king as part of the peace settlement. Sweden was the only country that Norway had been at war with in the preceding centuries.

This crisis of trust meant that a new kind of trust was needed, based on the mutual obligations of people who were willing to take joint responsibility for their country. This was the moment to create a new platform, and some lay people (in particular), drawing on contemporary ideas

of liberty, fraternity and equality in both America and Europe, saw the rule of law and popular sovereignty as the way forward.

The Church accepted and supported the people's need for a new kind of freedom based on new obligations and mutual trust. Many churches served as the polling stations for the election to choose delegates to the Norwegian Constituent Assembly, which showed people's trust in churches as respectable, public and accountable places.

But the Church also made another contribution to freedom and trust, which was expressed in the special sermon that was chosen for the service held on election day, the 25th of February. Psalm 62, 8-9: "He is my shelter. Trust in God at all times, my people. Tell him all your troubles, for he is our refuge."

This text is a cherished and powerful one for many people, and one which offers comfort in many phases of our lives. Trust in God is at the heart of faith. It is the trust in completely unmerited favour, in the source of love.

Trusting that God is there for us can be a truly liberating experience when people let us down or when our lives are difficult. And if there is one thing that I have learnt a lot about by meeting Christian people in a variety of contexts, it is the importance of praying together and of praying for one another, and of telling God about all of our troubles. Individually – and above all together.

Psalm 62 starts with the words "I wait patiently for God to save me; I depend on him alone." And it continues: "He alone". This is faith echoing the first commandment: Worship no god but me. For as Deuteronomy 5:6 says in introduction to the commandment: "I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves." The first commandment is one that liberates us from needing other gods, other lords, other powers. It is liberating both for individuals and for society to know that it is God, above all, whom we should honour in our words and in our deeds.

One of the most important books of the Bible in terms of helping us to understand Christian freedom as a collective freedom, is Paul's Epistle to the Romans. It is a thorough and profound theological attempt to answer specific questions about our lives. That is apparent if you read the letter in its entirety. The first and last parts clearly show what Paul is getting at. He answers the question of why and how people who are deeply different, in this case Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ, can also be free to accept themselves and others, trusting and taking mutual responsibility for one another, in spite of their differences. He isn't talking about different tastes and diets, but about traditions, and thus beliefs about what is right and wrong, holy and unholy, about questions that are important to both sides. If you are free, it is possible to focus on the true nature of the kingdom of God, and to respect the customs of other people. "For God's Kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of the righteousness, peace, and joy which the Holy Spirit gives" (14:17).

The message of the letter is also summed up by what is one of my very favourite verses in the whole Bible: "Accept one another, then, for the glory of God, as Christ has accepted you (15:7). How can everyone achieve freedom to honour God together, to set aside their other differences and to all keep the first commandment? The question of our freedom in relation to one another is closely linked to the question of God.

It is therefore necessary to discover the principle, the law – one could say constitution – that sets people free. “There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit, which brings us life in union with Christ Jesus, has set me free from the law of sin and death. What the Law could not do, because human nature was weak, God did” (8:1-3). To reach this point, Paul started his argument with God, and the first commandment (chapters 1 and 2). The readers have already disobeyed that commandment, and have in practice worshipped other gods. “They do the things that they should not do; they are filled with all kinds of wickedness, evil, greed, and vice; they are full of jealousy, murder, fighting, deceit, and malice;” which is followed by a long list of their errors, including that they are “proud, and boastful” (1:28ff). As such, they are all in the same boat: “You have no excuse at all, whoever you are” (2:1). None of them have any honour in the eyes of God. Nor in relation to one another do they have any reason to feel pride.

With this in mind, Paul shows that freedom lies in the fact that God is God, and that only God is God. Only God judges. And only God can liberate us through Christ. The freedom offered by the Church is the freedom that we can have if, trusting in God, we follow the first commandment, and let God be God. This commandment can be kept by believing that it is God who speaks to us through Jesus Christ. Christ kept the first commandment, and was willing to leave everything to God, to give up everything in the battle against injustice, falsehood, oppression, sin and death. “But by the free gift of God’s grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free” (3:24). Through Christ we can become free to believe in God’s laws, just as Abraham did. Through faith in God who raised Christ from the dead – liberating him from the power of death (4:24). We can be freed from our shared inheritance of being bound by sin, a fate that we have inherited from the first human (Chapter 5), freed from sin in order to become slaves of righteousness, freed from the requirements of the law and freed to serve one another (chapters 6, 7 and 8). We can become free to make our lives a holy sacrifice to God, free to live differently, free to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, free to contribute to justice and peace in society – even to pay taxes. Thus we become free not to judge others (Chapter 14) if they do something differently from us, free to show strength by not using our strength against others. We also develop the freedom to show financial solidarity with others (Chapter 15).

Remember that the whole argument is based on the first commandment. We must let God be God. And the next important point is therefore that we are all equal “For God judges everyone by the same standard” (2:11). We must all be seen through God’s eyes. We are created in God’s image, and we can receive God’s righteousness. That, and not what we have done or not done, or how we are different from other people, is what defines our worth.

A fellowship of people who genuinely preach and believe in the gospel is liberating. We don’t need other gods, we don’t need other saviours, we don’t need to be proud or petty with one another, we don’t need to feel envy or let discord have the last word about our fellowship. In God’s eyes, we are all the same. We should be personally humble, but confident on behalf of the fellowship, the liberating fellowship to which we – exactly – belong. Belonging to Christ, belonging to a fellowship that is not based around our achievements and our opinions or judgements about ourselves and others, is liberating for us and for our attitudes towards other people. Because you cannot differentiate between people if you believe in our saviour, Jesus Christ. God doesn’t. Therefore we can follow Christ, whose “life of service was on behalf of the Jews, to show that God is faithful, to make his promises to their ancestors come true and to enable even the Gentiles to praise God for his mercy (15:8-9)”.



Christian freedom exists for the sake of our lives with other people, so that we can honour God in that way.

If the Church of Norway comes across as a tolerant and inclusive fellowship, liberated by God's mercy in Christ, whose members are free to seek to understand God's will, free to be themselves and to serve others, then that is to the glory of God.

If the ecumenical fellowship, locally, nationally and internationally, talks about the things that unite us in Christ, and allows room for the differences between us, then that is to the glory of God.

The four key words in the Church of Norway's vision – open, traditional, evangelical and serving – are therefore closely related, and must be understood together. Perhaps any explanation of what is meant by "traditional" should say something about honouring God together?

#### 4. Freedom of speech and belief in different parts of the world

I feel both humility and pride when I think about how the Church of Norway, working with a variety stakeholders and organisations, has defended the freedom of others in its words and deeds. The WCC has both been strengthened by these contributions and has acted as an inspiration for what has happened in Norway. The Church of Norway has in a variety of ways, and at different times, demonstrated that it is free to speak, believe and serve the people and the country. In recent years a lot of its efforts have involved participating in international, ecumenical organisations, and collaborating with other churches and stakeholders. Some work has also been done in cooperation with the representatives of other religions. These activities appear to be increasingly relevant and important, albeit challenging.

Even in democratic and relatively ordinary times, there have been many important issues where the Church has spoken up for freedom, on behalf of us and coming generations. The Church is part of the public debate, where attitudes and opinions are formed. That is where the Church can communicate its message – and where it has its power, for that matter. That power must be used to defend freedom by discussing both fundamental and topical questions relating to justice and peace.

Today there are actually more democratic states than ever before, and many people have been lifted out of abject poverty. Moreover, there are very few, if any, military conflicts between states. Most conflicts are internal struggles between different groups of people, sometimes even defined by their religious identities, and often influenced by geopolitical interests. Unfortunately we can see that fundamental human rights are not the platform on which all states and nations build their legislation and practice. Freedom of speech and belief are by no means universal rights, as Christians, as well as many other religious groups, experience each day. The situation is extremely serious, and in some cases it is right to speak of persecution. Sometimes this is part of a wider conflict, where religion is one of many strands to the dispute.

I have developed an enormous respect for the ways in which many individual Christians and churches manage to cope with their genuine lack of freedom. They must communicate their message, yet do so in a way that does not undermine the safety and way of life of the church

and its followers. They represent a gospel and a fellowship that can create a free space, both externally and internally.

How can an international Christian fellowship respond to the demands and dynamics of consumer societies, to the unfair distribution of wealth and the big differences between rich and poor? I was recently asked that question by German theologians and church leaders, during a discussion on “equitable growth”. International organisations don’t possess any magic formula or position of power. But Christian churches must, wherever they are – locally, nationally and internationally – liberate people to believe in God, to keep the first commandment, to have no other gods, thereby freeing them to serve God and other people, and to keep all of the ten commandments. Furthermore, its role must be to seek out and respect what is holy in this fragile life, not least the hard-won experience and need for freedom of the afflicted and underprivileged, in order to speak up for them.

There are many other examples of the church speaking up and, perhaps more importantly, acting in a way that gives it credibility. In recent months, the world’s youngest nation state, South Sudan, has been struggling for peace to go with its independence. With strong support from Norway and Norwegian organisations. After gaining independence, a lack of mutual trust has meant that people do not enjoy freedom from violence and fear. There are reports of terrible scenes of murders and massacres. Amidst this, the churches and church leaders are some of the few people who have managed to maintain the freedom needed to look beyond the immediate conflict and to defend the interests of the whole nation. Working with groups including Norwegian Church Aid, the WCC has tried to bring together church leaders and help ensure that they get a real say at the negotiating table in Addis Ababa over the coming days, so that they can speak out clearly, but constructively, on behalf of all ethnic groups about a shared future of peace, freedom and hope. Our calling is to continue praying and working for the people and churches of South Sudan, both now and once the media has forgotten about what is going on there. I would especially like to remind people to pray for Hilde Frafjord Johnsen, a member of our own church who is leading the UN’s extremely challenging mission in the country.

Sometimes churches have to speak without using many words. Often the most important thing is for the church to be present, in solidarity with people who face injustice and restrictions on their freedom, whether due to unfair laws or through hostile actions. In Pakistan, both Christians and Muslims suffer from the fact that laws against blasphemy are poisoning relationships, as they can be used to denounce people and to put them and their families in inhuman situations. Unfortunately that situation is not unique to Pakistan. In many countries religious extremists are using violence to prevent both Christians and other groups from leading peaceful, free lives, ruled by justice. In some countries there are laws or official practices that restrict religious freedom. It is important to speak out against this, but in such a way that it doesn’t further raise tensions for the people who are most affected. Continuing to be a church, standing by your members in solidarity, is often the strongest message. Sometimes in those situations I have encountered expressions of an inner freedom that have surprised and inspired me.

In December I visited the churches in South African in conjunction with the memorial for former president Nelson Mandela. They wanted the international Christian fellowship to have a visible presence on an important occasion like that. With humility and pride I was able to act as a representative of the Church of Norway and of Norwegian efforts to bring the apartheid regime to an end. The churches were responsible for providing pastoral support and help to the family, and to a people in mourning, and I was invited to attend one of the daily evening

prayers that were held at Mandela's house. In a strange way that occasion tied the much bigger picture of "The long walk to freedom" to the very immediate and human aspects of the church's role. Which is to be with people in life and death, in faith and in prayer.

There I said that it had been an honour for the WCC and its member churches to stand alongside him and the other South Africans fighting against racial segregation. But it had also been important for the churches to be challenged about what it really means to hold the fundamental values that we claim to believe in – human dignity and basic human rights. For some of the churches in South Africa, but also elsewhere, it was a difficult, but absolutely essential, opportunity to confront their past. Now the previously segregated Dutch Reformed Church is rejoining the WCC, 30 years after withdrawing in protest at the WCC's positions. One of its members was Beyers Naude, who paid a high price for changing sides and becoming one of the most prominent white leaders of the anti-apartheid movement.

Mandela himself came and expressed his gratitude for our support, thanking the Norwegian churches when he came to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, and the WCC at its assembly in Harare in 1998, amongst other occasions. Even after his death, his life's achievements continue to challenge us. Are we willing to walk towards freedom – for the sake of others, not least – even if the road is long? Are we willing to do it in a way that is compatible with peace and justice? Very few people have better demonstrated, both through words and deeds, that justice can be gained by means that will also lead to peace. And he, along with others, showed that the Christian message of forgiveness is genuinely liberating, and can lead to a new beginning for everyone.

We are not alone in wanting the freedom to speak, believe and serve. It can be good for us to see that as well. We belong to a fellowship that can help to give us the right perspective and sense of proportion in the issues that we raise.

##### 5. Free to speak up for the rights of others: Human rights and the Norwegian Constitution

The international community has developed and established the concept of "human rights", specifying them in conventions and treaties. This has partly been a response to the massive wars, genocides and ethnic cleansings that have been perpetrated against so many innocent people, particularly in the 20th century. How can we prevent such events from being repeated? The WCC, represented by its commissions and individuals, has helped to formulate some of these important concepts. And we are involved on a daily basis in how these rights can be made reality for people in a variety of situations and across many parts of the world.

Unfortunately it is apparent that we cannot take for granted that everyone will perceive these rights to be genuinely universal, or that states will take responsibility for protecting the rights of their citizens. And we even see that religion can be used as an argument for limiting the areas of life in which states can intervene, and for letting families or religious communities decide what rights women and children should have, for example. Supposedly theological arguments are also unfortunately used to justify states' failures to safeguard the most basic rights of particularly vulnerable groups such as sexual minorities, including their right to health care, equality before the law, etc. As a Christian fellowship we must do more to ensure that human rights reflect fundamental Christian values, both through the dialogue between member churches and through our interaction with other religious groups. We are currently looking at how the WCC can make this a priority for its work over the coming years. Here the contributions of the Church of Norway and other organisations in Norway are very valuable.

Human rights and human dignity are not just relevant to the Church of Norway's activities in other countries. They are also the foundation for laws and decision-making criteria in our own country. The human rights committee of the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations has prepared a very thorough, thoughtful and relevant discussion of many of these questions in a report for one of the items on the agenda at this General Synod. It will become a very useful document for a wide range of people once it has been translated into English. You should be proud of the fact that a topic of such importance to people both here and elsewhere in the world is on the General Synod's agenda in this anniversary year. The document also clearly demonstrates that the role of the Church is to ensure that the values expressed through human rights, both individually and collectively, become the foundation for joint programmes in our society and other societies. That involves building consensus around the values, finding ways of putting them into practice in specific laws and regulations and having a serious and responsible debate about how the various rights interact. But the document also highlights that the Church must both promote the rights and help to bear the responsibilities, the duties, that we and all other people share. And more than that: the calling of the church to serve in love goes beyond what any human rights can define.

The new Article 2 of the Norwegian constitution states that the values of the state are still based on our humanist and Christian heritage. It also states that the constitution is based on human rights.

Now that the Church's position has changed, and it has gained the freedom that it long sought, it is natural to use this anniversary of the constitution to look at the extent to which the fundamental rights of all people are expressed clearly and comprehensibly in the constitution, which is a statement of values, after all.

The parliamentary committee given the task of looking at precisely this question, which was led by (and later named after) the late Inge Lønning, made extensive recommendations on how the constitution should set out what the basic human rights actually were. It is good to state our commitment to them explicitly. Implementing the proposals wouldn't actually change the legal position in Norway, but it would be a clear and visible way of informing people of what values we have committed ourselves to by ratifying most of the important declarations and conventions on human rights. The proposals, which will be debated by the Norwegian parliament in the coming weeks, would have an important impact on how Norway expresses its shared values through the constitution itself.

In general terms it is both relevant and important for the Church to take part in the debate about the main principles expressed in a constitution. However, there are two specific reasons that justify the General Synod discussing the matter on an occasion like this anniversary. Firstly, it is a unique opportunity to tell people that the values expressed through these human rights are actually values that rightly can and should be identified as coming from our Christian and humanist heritage. That provides a great springboard for making sense of the new expression in the constitution – "Christian and humanist" – and for embedding it more firmly in the wording of the constitution.

Secondly, the Church should support making the wording of the constitution, which is a reference point for all the inhabitants and stakeholders in the Norwegian democracy, more specific about what is meant by freedom and equality for all people. It includes freedom of speech, belief and opinion – in other words, the full range of political and religious rights. But it also encompasses the economic and social rights that are essential to a good standard of living, an education and the ability to participate in the labour market. These are the rights

that make it genuinely meaningful to talk about shared democratic goals such as equality, justice and peace, in a society that takes responsibility for all of its inhabitants.

If the Church were to take an active interest in these changes to the constitution, just as it did in the changes affecting its own status, it would be a significant way of showing that the Church intends to exercise its freedom to speak, believe and serve. It is the duty of the Church to defend the rights that benefit everyone. Now there is a historic opportunity to support the idea that our shared constitution should explicitly express the entire range and substance of the human rights enjoyed by all people in Norway. It is a matter of guaranteeing and cementing the protection that human rights afford for the people who need them, so that it does not just exist in laws that can be changed at any moment.

## 6. Free to speak, believe and serve: The day-to-day tasks of Norway's people's church

It is time to conclude my speech. The theme of the Church's contribution to this anniversary of the constitution leads us directly on to the Church of Norway's vision, and to the nature of the Church's specific tasks, whether locally, nationally or internationally. But an anniversary like the present one is also a good opportunity to think about what the new phrase in the constitution, a "people's church", really means, from a theological, strategic and – if you will forgive me – popular point of view.

The answer to these questions must be found precisely in the day-to-day tasks of the Church: in its preaching and administration of the sacrament, in its services and funerals, in diakonia, in its religious instruction, in prayer and pastoral care, in music and other forms of culture, in sorrow and in joy, in organisational activities, everyday services and administrative tasks, in speaking up for others and contributing to the public debate. In short, in everything that is an expression of the Church's role and unique position as an institution and fellowship. It is in all of these things that people can find their way to freedom and confidence, to a sense of fellowship and a belief in the future. It is the actual preaching of the gospel that gives shape and meaning to it all, that makes it mine and yours, and allows us as individuals and as a group to take part in the life of the nation and the world.

And my observation and my belief is that we are actually doing this. We must never underestimate the importance of the everyday work of the Church. And who said that it should be easy? Often the most difficult things that we do are the most important ones.

Everything that we say about the church in our creed is liberating in the true sense. We are one, holy, universal and apostolic church. We are united through our holy rites and the holy people who preach forgiveness of sin and the hope of eternal life. We are part of the whole worldwide fellowship that shares the common Christian traditions that have existed through the ages, but that is also a fellowship here and now, where we are. We didn't invent the church; she was a gift to us and to our community and to the fellowship of different communities to which we belong, in Norway and internationally. We are apostolic, in the sense that we build our work on the mission and promise of freedom of the apostles. We have been sent out, by Jesus himself, to the people who are in need of the liberating gospel, travelling towards the kingdom of God in righteousness, peace and joy.

If Christ liberates us, we can move on from a milestone like this anniversary with renewed confidence.

If we can be liberated to be ourselves, without becoming self-sufficient, we can truly become a people's church for Norway.

Free to speak, believe and serve. To the glory of God.