Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. It is a great joy that we can all be at this important central committee meeting, whose theme is “Walking and Serving Together for Peace and Justice.” Karibuni! Welcome to all of you. I thank God for giving us this opportunity to reflect on and celebrate the achievements of the past 70 years in working for Christian unity and action. Moreover, the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace that we launched, as the WCC, back in 2013 has continued to be vital in responding to God’s call for unity, mission, justice and peace. Therefore, this central committee meeting has a special character in terms of our celebration of the 70th anniversary and this year 2018, and it will continue to form the basis of our anniversary activities together with member churches and the wider ecumenical fellowship. Another dimension of our meeting this time around is walking together, as we review our performance of the mandate given to us by the last assembly while we are mid-way on the journey to the next assembly. Finally, this central committee meeting is special because we are halfway also in terms of our meetings together, and we are expected to make critical decisions that will guide the future of the council. Thus we are at a time when we are once again reminded of our transitional nature as an organization.

2. My address in the context of the theme attempts to look at the ecumenical landscape and the gracious spaces where we have walked and served together for justice and peace. The address also delves into the areas of concern regarding the state of governance, specifically democracy and the attendant dilemmas and threats that democratic governance is experiencing. I conclude by reminding us to step up our resolve and our commitment to “move together toward justice and peace.”

What Does the Lord Expect of Us?

3. The theme “Walking and Serving Together for Peace and Justice” evokes aspirations of a world free of injustices, free of divisions and free of conflicts. With what was happening worldwide back in 2013, we felt that it would be a perfect response by the council, the wider ecumenical fellowship and people of good will. This being our WCC 70th anniversary, it must be said that there has never been a better time to reflect on the importance of walking together as churches toward a peaceful and just society. We’re experiencing an increase in polarization, a widening gap between the rich and the poor, climate injustice, racism, xenophobia, extremism, violence and gender inequality, among many other trends. It is reminiscent of that time when God’s prophet Micah (6:8), asked the question, “What does the Lord expect of us?” As we share our narratives on the theme, God tells us through his prophet that God wants not only trust and faith among his people but also a strong solidarity. God is watching us to see if we have solidarity strong enough to help build bridges, save the earth, reconcile, heal, and transform the lives of millions of people all over the world.

4. Gracious spaces for joint journeys. As we gather here, I’m delighted to acknowledge various efforts that we’ve made toward our goals as a council. For many of us, the Pilgrim Team Visits (PTVs) that we embarked on have enabled us to walk together in our ministry of presence, listening, praying with
and supporting the victimized as they shared their narratives in different parts of the world. There are a number of such highlights that continue to give us hope in our efforts toward a peaceful and just world. Some of these are contained in our programme reports and will be shared during the thematic plenaries. First, South Sudan has provided space for accompaniment, as well as ecumenical and interfaith solidarity. Yet, despite our focus on and intensified ecumenical efforts with the people of South Sudan, it is sad to observe what continues to happen there. It is unfortunate that the youngest country in the world does not enjoy the peace that it has long sought. The South Sudan conflict remains a source of displacement and the dislocation of millions, destruction of property, and the loss of so many lives. With both sides of the conflict unwilling to compromise, thousands of children, the elderly and women continue to bleed and die; and we cannot imagine the type of rape and violence that are meted out on these innocent people. Years of youthful life are being lost in a battle for power, status and greed. We are thankful for the humble and God-fearing people, like those of the South Sudan Council of Churches and its leaders, in creating platforms for peace talks in the country. There is still much to be achieved in the now revitalized IGAD-led talks, and so in this space we witness the ecumenical family having to ascend to its calling to walk and serve for justice and peace amidst confusion. Brothers and sisters, this is a space that is providing new momentum to walk together on new paths of multilateral collaboration, which is necessary for lasting solution peace.

5. Additionally, the Syrian war, which has engulfed that Middle East country, is another space where churches in the Middle East and especially Europe have had to marshal courage to walk together to save lives and face political powers in order to receive refugees. Alas! It is tragic that so many lives have been lost on the journeys. Meanwhile, the challenges of integration surfacing in the host countries remind us of the need to continue ecumenical collaboration and engagement with other actors in society to ensure we remain on track in so far as humanitarian assistance, justice and peace are concerned. It is our duty within these spaces to continue urging NATO allies and the Syrian government to break the cycle of violence. It is our considered view that airstrikes lead to loss of life on both sides of the war, and a just and sustainable peace for all Syrians can only be brought about through a political solution. Once again, the WCC and churches in Syria and the region have a vital role to play in healing trauma, building bridges, working for justice and peace and nurturing social cohesion.

6. Furthermore, we remain optimistic and hopeful that our constructive engagement and accompaniment for a peaceful solution in the Korean Peninsula will in the long term yield fruit. Once again this is a space that requires us to acknowledge our vulnerability and fragility on the journey and the need for humility as we serve together. Millions of lives are at stake. Perhaps this is the one region, North East Asia, where our insights on joint initiatives and prayers to avert the build-up of armaments, especially nuclear arms, should inform our on-going work.

7. Misuse and abuse of religion. The trend of violence across the globe has significantly taken on a religious camouflage where we see churches and mosques being burned and believers killed. The introduction of this type of religious war is not new to us. While we are cognizant of the many global, national and even grassroots interfaith activities to address this trend, perhaps this is a growing space for walking together with people of other faiths that we must intentionally strengthen insofar as forums that will enhance interfaith relations are concerned. As much as there are diverse religious traditions, they should not be causes for conflict and victimization. No one has prayed for thunder to come down and wipe out another religion here today. It is commendable to see Pope Francis bridging the gap for peaceful coexistence with our Muslim brothers and sisters. By just accompanying a Muslim imam and a Jewish rabbi to the Dome of the Rock back in 2014, the Pope continued to show us what it really means to walk together. His visits have set the pace for an inclusive religious attitude all over the world. Never before in history has the intrinsic link between an authentic religious attitude and the great good of peace become evident to all as it is now. Interfaith work remains a major piece for the WCC, especially given the development of Islamophobia in some countries. Our walk toward justice and peace means working with communities to develop attitudes and values around unity in diversity.
8. **Spaces for gender justice.** Around the world, communities of women are rising up to the task of walking and serving together for justice and peace as their efforts get recognized. The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace visit to Colombia exposed participants to an ecumenical group that works across denominational and ideological lines for justice and peace. This trend is growing in our communities as women seek to work both at peace-building and conflict resolution through mediation and dialogue. The WCC, together with member churches, empowers religious women to use tools provided by the UN in advocating rights and gender justice. We all are aware of the Thursdays in Black campaign, operating through the simple gesture of wearing black on Thursdays. It is an expression of the desire for safe societies, free of rape, shootings, verbal abuse and discrimination due to our gender or sexual orientation. We still have a lot to be done on this front by urging governments and faith communities to develop policies that will create a just society of equality between men and women globally.

**What's at stake?**

9. **Democratic governance.** Recent years have witnessed a decline in the values and ethos of democratic governance due to the weakening of democratic structures across the world that were put in place after World War II. We are in many ways witnessing democracy and democratic governance under serious threat or even siege. To begin with, the global North, especially Europe, has a growing tendency toward conservative nationalist political parties that have found space in national parliaments. Meanwhile in the global South, not least Africa, democracy remains a shell, with elections ushering in politically motivated violence and conflict. Moreover, a number of African governments are reviewing their constitutions, especially regarding the tenure of presidents. At the United Nations level, although nation states are meant to participate equally and participation in the Security Council is shared on a rotation basis, the veto power rests with only five countries. With emerging politics of identity, where values of truth-telling and compassion are waning quickly, people of faith have to once again rise up to the task of providing guidance on this matter. It is therefore incumbent upon churches and civil society to walk together in realizing stronger democratic institutions as visualized at the founding of the WCC back in 1948. It is everyone’s hope that his or her views are heard. People, regardless of their faith, want to participate in fairly determining who their leaders should be. So the increasing cases of incumbents wanting to retain power while at the same time continuing to oppress men and women of opposing views is unfortunate indeed.

10. **Together for gender justice.** We have many things and milestones to celebrate when we look at our journey together as men and women in church and society and our aspiration toward the just community of men and women. The pace of the walk has, however, been rather slow. A number of hurdles remain on the pathway, and they include crafting policy frameworks that can systematically and coherently affirm the dignity of men and women, boys and girls. Power relations between men and women remain asymmetrical. There is a need for continued empowerment of communities and churches to use new lenses and understand what society is losing by not utilizing the talents of more than 51 per cent of its population. Now, twenty years after the launch of the Decade of Churches’ Solidarity with Women, we are challenged to walk side by side as men and women toward just, peaceful and participatory communities and churches. In many ways it demands that we review our culture and understanding of masculinity. Both community and religious organizations should work to establish inclusive, safe and facilitative spaces for their decision-making.

11. **Toward a just and sustainable economy.** Our walk together must build on the momentum of the Paris Climate Accord and the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The gap between the rich and poor is not narrowing but widening, even in countries where the gross national product is growing. On the other hand, the rise of public-private partnership means that there are fewer resources in the form of development aid. It is estimated that there is a funding gap of 29 per cent of the amount required to assist four major humanitarian situations. With decreasing levels of aid, massive corruption in some countries, and inadequate climate resilience and adaptation strategies, justice and peace remain dim hopes in the lives of many. As much as we hope to achieve peace and prosperity together, we need to understand that creating platforms for economic justice is an
imperative that the ecumenical family must step up. Historical injustices and the resurgence of racial discrimination continue to cast a shadow on progress in WCC’s and other ecumenical initiatives and thus need to be addressed. Together and in solidarity with other people of good will, we have the potential to offer a foundation for addressing issues such as refugees, migration and economic inequality.

12. Our task is, inter alia, to continue serving together to reclaim the dignity and rights of all people as the basis for how we live together and urging nation states to respect international law. Without justice and peace, we cannot pursue our calling toward the unity of humankind and the church. I strongly believe that churches and civil society can help strengthen confidence; open doors of cooperation and dialogue that will keep trade wars from escalating; halt the marginalization of women and form a level playing field for full realization of economic development; and promote climate justice as balance in natural ecosystems is restored.

13. **The long journey.** In conclusion, walking and serving together for justice and peace has been and remains a long journey. There are moments when it is and will be tiring, torturous and sometimes dangerous. In a refugee camp, children from South Sudan apparently had prayed several times to return home to South Sudan but found themselves still confined in the camp and continued to ask, “Where is God?” In many crisis-hit regions, it is common to see kids in despair, maybe physically injured, emotionally drained, or even hopelessly looking for the next meal, as in the case of South Sudanese children. God wants us to spread love, but on its own it is just a word. That is why our theme of walking together is also a reminder that we need energy and strength that is God-given through the Holy Spirit so that we continue to walk and serve with survivors of conflict, rehabilitate them, and ensure they get food, shelter, education and security.

14. **Hope and Empowerment.** As a movement and an organization, we are more than ever called upon to be bearers of hope and vessels of empowerment of the people. To be vessels of hope and empowerment, we also empower each other on the journey toward justice and peace in order to build and strengthen bridges of trust, respect and patience. The remaining period of service implores us to step up collaboration and networking with other faith communities, all people of good will and international agencies to mitigate and end dehumanizing political, economic and socio-cultural violence. We know it is quite difficult to handle all these at the moment, but with strong resolve and revitalized commitment, we can continue moving forward together.

15. Our call for unity and for the dignity of all men and women should be echoed in every corner of the world so that the next generations will appreciate unity in diversity. Our contribution toward justice and peace as the WCC will surely increase as we push for new frontiers, setting new agendas and new initiatives that can bring real hope to a world so deprived of the values or the fruits of the spirit that Paul writes about in Galatians 5:22. Yes, let us celebrate the many small and large strides we have made in the last 70 years. Let us also be cognizant of the daunting task that remains to secure justice and peace, as well as to invite more people to share the vision. Philippians 2:4 says, “Each one of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Walking and serving together for justice and peace is about taking care of the interests of the others. As we walk and serve together, let us draw from the well of God’s grace for inspiration and guidance.

16. We are the current generation of leaders of the ecumenical movement, so everything rises with each one of us. Eyes are upon us, to see our resolve and our concrete actions on the journey of justice and peace. May God be with you all!

Thank you.