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## Report of the General Secretary

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### The Ecumenical Movement of Love Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit

#### 1. At a milestone: Blessings and challenges of 70 years since Amsterdam – and four years since Busan

1. We have come to a milestone, 70 years since the World Council of Churches was established. This year is also a milestone mid-way between our 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> assemblies. Every meeting of this significant body, the central committee, is a milestone for the WCC. This whole meeting of the central committee has been prepared as a comprehensive, significant, public, and quite dense event to commemorate, consider, and celebrate the life and work of the World Council of Churches. In addition, after our meeting, the milestone will be marked further by a unique visit of the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis. You will not get much time to rest. But let us pause for a moment to reflect on the way marked by this particular milestone.

2. This is a moment to look back, to see where we have gone, and to analyse where we have arrived at this stage. You have received several reports and evaluations about the last four years, and about what has happened since the last central committee meeting, in Trondheim, Norway, two years ago. You know a lot that is happening in the WCC as a fellowship of churches, as an organization, and as a partner and trusted instrument for leadership in the one ecumenical movement. Some of you also know much from the 70 years' history, as well. There is no need to use the next precious minutes to tell those stories again just now. I will focus on some of the overall tasks and issues of this organization and this meeting – seen from one particular perspective. Probably the most important perspective.

3. The WCC has made a difference in many ways because we have been “walking together, serving justice and peace” – as the theme for this meeting and our anniversary says. We should grasp this moment to share with one another and attend to our calling and to the challenges facing us, to how we have responded to them, and to summoning the courage to continue. There is markedly increased public attention to the WCC at this milestone, maybe more than any time before. I have been asked by several journalists, what are the purpose and the outcome of the work of the WCC? “In a few words,” they ask. I have answered: “Unity, justice, and peace. And how these three are interrelated in the church and in the world at large.” And how are they related? I have found no better way of describing what has motivated us, no more significant perspective, than to call the WCC a unique instrument for “the ecumenical movement of *love*.”

4. This milestone is a place where we offer thanksgiving to God. The churches in the WCC and other churches, like the Roman Catholic Church, are at a very, very different place in their relations to one another than they were 70 years ago. What we might take for granted, was not at all so in 1948.

5. We have seen more clearly what unites us. We have costly experiences of truth and reconciliation processes to share. We have gradually become able to understand one another better and respectfully deal with our differences. Even deep divisions based on theological convictions and historical developments can be bridged. We have learned a lot about living together with our diversity. We have become mutually accountable to one another and to our common calling and mission.

6. The 70 years since the beginning of the World Council of Churches have been a blessing and a challenge to the churches – and to the world.

7. How has this been possible? I believe it has to do with love.

8. In the ecumenical movement we need both perspectives on love, both *eros* and *agape*. We need the passion for fellowship, the longing for togetherness with the other – to be with one another. We also need the willingness to give, to offer what we have, even to sacrifice, to be able to put the needs of others first, following the example of Jesus Christ.

9. We have seen both dimensions of love, and that makes me confident in speaking about an ecumenical movement of love in these 70 years. The question of “what is in for me, for us?” cannot define a *koinonia* of love. We cannot ignore one another or withdraw our attention when it is no longer primarily serving our own interests.

10. The *blessings* that come from being a fellowship of love are many. This is not a zero-sum deal for doing business together. One plus one is more than two in the power of love. We have been sharing our gifts from the different churches, confessions and contexts. Sharing the sufferings and the precious joys has brought new and added dimensions of being church. I have been inspired and moved by seeing the many initiatives, agendas and people carry them forward through these 70 years as expressions of love, of genuine attempts and efforts to act in love for the fellowship and for justice and peace in the world.

11. The *challenges* we have received from one another in this movement of love have changed our preconceptions about one another, but also dealt with the truth about one another.

12. From the early initiatives long before 1948 till now it has been clear that the quest for the unity of the church has served a wider purpose: life together as God’s creation – as one humanity. The love that could be expressed among the churches should serve the life and peace of the world. After 70 years we have come to a place in our journey when we should not be shy to say that we learned a lot about how to reconcile, how to work for unity, justice and peace. This must be a legacy shared among us and with others who need it today. We have learned enough to see that we have to continue. The mission is not completed.

13. The urgent needs for unity, justice and peace have driven the WCC forward.. In this perspective I think it is proper to have a 70th anniversary in thanksgiving for the World Council of Churches as an instrument for the ecumenical movement *of love*. In this perspective we can accept, even embrace and celebrate, what are imperfect but real and diverse expressions of unity and shared service for justice and peace. Even if our unity is imperfect, it has dimensions driven by the love of Christ to us and to all humankind and to the whole creation.

14. This time we are asked to reflect on what have we been able to contribute - or not - as we now pass the mid-term milestone between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> assemblies. This means – if we use the images of this region – that we look at the bigger picture, the whole mountain range of the Alps, not just one hill or one peak or one valley. I asked my colleagues in the last staff planning days to offer some examples to share with one another and with you about the peaks we have been able to climb and surmount during these four years. In this inspiring - but not complete – picture we can see a lot that inspires us to continue working and planning together. I am proud of leading this team and this work during this time. In that perspective of four years we can see more clearly the character of the work that the organization and the fellowship of the WCC can contribute. The more detailed studies of plans and reports is the task of the executive committee.

15. In the four-year perspective – and even more in the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary perspective – we zoom out and see the larger landscape. We see both the blessings and the challenges of doing something together. We

see that the WCC even changed the landscapes of our churches and our relations, even beyond the landscape of our churches.

## **2. 70 Years of the WCC: A theological interpretation of a fellowship of love**

### **2.1. A fellowship participating in the love of God**

16. We have been helped by some of the major projects of Faith and Order (whose texts will now be made accessible in a digitized version) to see our fellowship as *koinonia*, as a shared gift, participating in the *love* of the triune God of life, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God is love. The church is invited to be one – as the Holy Trinity is one – in love. The church is called to be the expression of this love in a broken and sinful world. How could the ecumenical movement, trying to unite the churches in this call and to bring the signs of the reign of God – justice, peace and joy – into this world – how could this movement be something other than a movement of love?

### **2.2 An ecumenical movement of the cross and the resurrection**

17. We should also at this milestone read our ecumenical history from the perspective of the biblical call to the ministry of reconciliation. That means: “For the love of Christ compels us” or, in another translation: “The love of Christ moves us on” (2 Cor. 5:14). We have a shared gospel as our basis, corresponding to this point made by St Paul: “And he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (5:15).

When I began my ministry for the WCC as general secretary some years ago, I found that I had to see this movement in the light of the cross. Everything is proven by the cross. The cross is the sign of God’s love for all. The cross is also the sign of the challenges and of the suffering, even death, that might come when we do what we are called to do as disciples of Jesus Christ. We cannot have unity of the church or an ecumenical movement without the cross. The meaning of what we are doing is not to be measured in normal indicators of “success” or great wind in the sails and applause from everybody. For the true unity and service of the church there cannot be anything “except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2).

18. Yet this is only possible to see in the light of the resurrection. The call to unity and reconciliation, justice and peace, is driven by the one who died and was risen – so that those who live might no longer live for themselves. We are called to find the proper expression of the love given in Christ to us – in our way of living together. We serve the God of life, leading us to justice and peace. The WCC has challenged the powerful and everybody who has responsibility for making decisions on behalf of many. (We have spoken truth to power. We do so driven by love for all, and particularly for those suffering, occupied, colonized, excluded, non-privileged, marginalized, discriminated against.) It is in this perspective that we also should see a very important shared ecumenical theological point, “the preferential option for the poor.” This axiom is expressing God’s love for the world in a particularly profound and relevant way. This is our shared faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ.

### **2.3 A fellowship itself in need of the love of God**

19. The whole biblical story shows why human beings are in need of divine love, both individually and collectively. There is no reason to understand human life in another way in our time. The need for divine grace is at least as obvious as before.

20. The encounter with Peter in chapter 21 of the Gospel of John must be read in light of the famous words of chapter 17. The prayer that they may all be one is fulfilled in a unique expression of love. The way forward to the ministry of unity is reopened in Jesus’ generous invitation to the meal at the shore for the disillusioned fishermen. This expression of love is also a call to accountability: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Yet the question of Jesus Christ is not leading to sentimentality and emotional self-preoccupation, but to a new and wider and much more demanding task, namely to share the new sign of fellowship and unity in the meal also with others – in all dimensions of the meal: “Feed my sheep – tend my sheep.”

21. One night almost 40 years ago I read that text after asking God for guidance for my life. The question from Jesus was overwhelming, almost unfair. How can we fully and honestly say that we really love Christ? How can we do something reciprocating the endless and unfathomable love of Christ? Jesus Christ expects that we can, even if we feel that it is beyond our capacity. This story has motivated many, myself included, for ministry in the church and in the ecumenical movement.

22. There is no reason to believe that we who are involved in this movement, which is meant to heal wounds and mend broken relationships are ourselves in any less need of divine grace and love. There is no sense in talking about an ecumenical movement of love without being honest about ourselves and realistic about the people involved in this movement as human beings – sometimes able to lose sight of the purpose and the objective of what we are here for.

23. Yet Jesus Christ did not ask for perfectionism but honesty and love. The world is not in need of perfectionism, but desperately in need of love.

#### **2.4 The attitudes of love for the ecumenical movement**

24. The call to work for unity, justice and peace requires some kind of shared attitudes that make it possible to pursue shared objectives. These attitudes can to some extent be defined and can be pursued and used as criteria for what kind of professionalism and capacity are needed for this particular type of work. It is not only individual and emotional dimensions of love we are talking about.

25. In my analysis of the texts from our ecumenical history (in *The Truth We Owe Each Other*), and from my daily experience of our discussions and our practices, I have found that there is required *an attitude of mutual accountability*. This means a firm position reflected in practice and in established relations of openness and reliability. Willingness to share but also to learn from others and their contributions must be articulated through a constructive criticism that also is shown in proper self-criticism. Accountability for our common, shared Christian faith and values is essential, as is accountability to the common mission of the churches.

26. Increasingly, I see this attitude of mutual accountability and its corresponding structures and practices as ways to embody the quality of relations needed for a fellowship of diversity seeking unity in its objectives and practices. It is a concretization of what the attitude of love means, particularly in an institutional setting like ours.

27. The attitude of love is more than softness and gentleness; it is the reliable and solid relationship that also allows for expression of disagreement and differences for the sake of necessary clarity. Love means the ability to say both yes and no and to discern when to say which – even if it sometimes hurts, for a while for some, and even for those who have to say it.

#### **2.5 An ecumenical movement of love embracing diversity**

28. One of the characteristics of the WCC is that it is by definition a fellowship of diversity: different churches, with different traditions and confessions, even different visions and expressions of unity. Another characteristic is that the WCC has embraced diversity in our human family in terms of acknowledging different cultures, different abilities, different ways of expressing fellowship. This is the case also when we have developed methods of consensus-building.

29. This mosaic is our strength and our glory. We embrace the diversity given by God. We do so in love for one another and for God the creator of all and whose image we bear.

30. Sometimes I wonder why we are not able to embrace more of the differences and diversity among us in all aspects of human life and human nature. We try to contribute to this process as the WCC, and also in issues where the churches are struggling within themselves. We are, for example, working carefully to find a common ground for conversations about issues related to the personal issues of human sexuality. The advisory group we have appointed has promising work in progress toward delivering a report in 2020.

Let us not end the conversation with their report, as happened after the significant and substantial report in 2006 on these themes.

31. The question for all of us remains: How can we express more clearly the love of God for all human beings, regardless of who they are and to which community they belong?

### **3. The way forward**

#### **3.1 The movement of high ambitions**

32. Where is the way forward? Given the reflections above, no wonder the purpose and the objectives of the WCC are very ambitious. They should be. We have allowed ourselves to set such very ambitious objectives, because there is an understanding of the WCC as a leading agent for the unity of the churches as a sign of the unity of humankind. Is this a sign of being unrealistic, overambitious, setting objectives that can really never be achieved? Is this a sign of the blindness that, it is often said, is the characteristic of the first falling in love, and, if so, should we after 70 years become more realistic?

33. The objectives of unity, justice and peace are God-given ideals, characteristics of the reign of God breaking into this world. They are genuine expressions of what the love of Christ can restore, how the cross and the resurrection together relate to the world of sin and evil as it is, but still transforming this reality.

34. There is a fascinating willingness in the WCC to try to do what is right. In the WCC, there are high objectives for the whole of life, for visible unity, for the care of creation, for human dignity and rights, for a just community of women and men, for better protection of children, for health and healing, for reconciliation and peace, for mutual understanding among the religions, for end of poverty, for just distribution of wealth and resources, for involvement of all generations in these common efforts, for doing them in an inclusive and fair way. And much more. In my view this is beautiful. But, I have to admit, sometimes it is quite demanding to work for an organization with such ambitious objectives and limited resources. But if we understand them properly as expressions of how the love of Christ for us motivates us in doing this, they make a lot of sense.

35. We have a review of these overall objectives in our strategic objectives for this period, focusing on five major expressions of how the WCC in this time can contribute to this ecumenical movement of love. The central committee this time is asked to reflect on how these strategic goals have helped us to move and to act properly. We have worked hard to translate these strategic goals into more specific objectives for our programme work for the period of four years, then further into the plans for every year. These are brought to the executive committee to define the plans according to the budgets and staffing resources available, discerning the changing needs from year to year. There we try to be faithful to our mandates, though sometimes we have to say, "This is too much, we cannot do this."

36. Sometimes we see that we should have used our resources better and more efficiently. But I can report that the WCC is in a good process of developing better formulations of adequate objectives and outcome indicators, as an expression of our stewardship.

37. In all these processes I can interpret the efforts to make plans, to work to achieve the objectives, to do something important, something new, something that makes a difference, as expressions of love for those who need what we can do: the churches, the people, the earth. I am greatly inspired by how the ambitions of members of our staff, governing bodies, reference groups and advisory groups, commissions and committees are driven by this overall and sometimes overarching ambition. I see it as a real sign of love.

#### **3.2 The ecumenical movement of love as pilgrimage**

38. Love is "the better way" to take on all issues, challenges and tasks we are addressing as a church fellowship, as the body of Christ, seeking unity, justice and peace, as St Paul reminds us in 1 Cor. 13. It

was so 70 years ago, it is so today, and will so be tomorrow. This is what makes it one ecumenical movement. One way to do that is to see how the pilgrimage approach can express this dimension of an ecumenical ecclesiology, pursuing the dimensions of *diakonia*, serving justice and peace. This leads us to some reflections on where we are and where we are going after passing this milestone.

39. Some of these ambitions mentioned above have been transformed into the concept of *pilgrimage* in this period of the work of the WCC. I think that has been a new challenge for many to understand; what it should mean and what that perspective brings to our work. We have discussed that several times. We see now more clarity in the theology, in the way of describing objectives, and in the practices and experiences of what it can mean. The reference group for the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, and the theological study groups supporting its work, have contributed a lot to this. The methodology of “pilgrim visits” (not unlike the “living letters” methodology from some years ago, but now even more focussed on solidarity and accompaniment) is also developing. And this idea of pilgrimage is seen in the many visits made by colleagues, groups appointed by the WCC to visit different parts of the world.

40. I find that also the participation and presence of the general secretary (representing the WCC and the fellowship) in many places is meaningfully seen as ecumenical pilgrimages, seeking unity, justice and peace together with the churches and other ecumenical partners. I report to the executive committee regularly about my travels and visits, also as contributions to programme objectives in many ways. They will not be reported here as they can be found in the reports referred in the minutes of the executive committee.

41. Even more, we have developed this concept of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace to become the overall perspective in everything we do, and we see that this motif of pilgrimage translates as openness; as willingness to be present in the lives of others as accompaniment, listening and acting in solidarity; as readiness for change and transformation of the surroundings and ourselves as in the theme of transforming discipleship in the recent world conference on mission and evangelism in Arusha, Tanzania. This is also the dominating and shared perspective in how we understand and develop ecumenical relations, strongly expressed in the motto for the visit of Pope Francis: “Walking, praying and working together.”

42. The pilgrimage perspective and the pursuit of pilgrimage initiative are characteristic of this period of work. It is more than an idea that we can leave behind when we come to the next assembly. We need to reflect on how this approach continues even as we move on to a new theme and a new phase in the years to come, in a movement of love.

### **3.3 A counter-movement for unity against forces of polarization, fear and hate**

43. We are experiencing a new momentum in finding new expressions of unity. It is an urgent task to move on for us as churches, and for the service we can do in the world. This is happening in a time when also there are so many polarizing and even dividing forces in the world, even using religious faith and identity as a tactic for dividing people.

44. The three values of unity, justice and peace held together in love are the core of the mission of the WCC. I believe that precisely this ability to keep these three together is the genuine and critical contribution of the WCC in the time ahead of us. It has been possible to see how they are connected in the way we have pursued the idea of pilgrimage, discipleship and fellowship. This must continue as we move on, in a counter-movement to many other strong movements and forces of our time, affecting our churches as well as the world at large.

45. The “realpolitik” of the church is defined by the gospel’s call to love one another, to be one, to be expressions of the love of God in the Trinity and expressed in the relation to human beings seeking the truth in faith. Being one is a sign of this love so that the world may believe. God is love, and there is no way to love God without loving the sister and brother in need (1 John 4:17-19).

46. “The power of love” is a message to the world, to the powerful and to the powerless, to all who are longing for a different reality from what we see in today’s world. This is to be expressed in our quest for

the unity of the church and the unity of humankind, serving the sustainability and unity of God's creation. We cannot leave the quest for unity on a side-track. We should include all our reflections on church unity in the wider horizon of work for a sustainable, just and peaceful unity in the world. The ecumenical movement of love has much to contribute in these efforts, bringing other perspectives and dimensions into proper relationships that we need to develop and build in our time. (This is a theme I have pursued on several occasions, also in the executive committee, and you have seen them in the minutes from those meetings. In the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *The Ecumenical Review*, which you are receiving in this meeting, my article has this as its focal point.)

47. There are many forces promoting conflict and violence. There are enormous powers of division and polarization, widening the gaps between the rich and poor, the privileged and the non-privileged (in terms of wealth, security, health, etc.). There are shocking signs of some powerful nations seeking only their own interests, not world peace or creation care for our one and only planet. There are signs of ignoring international law or utilizing it for one's own purposes, of the deconstruction of multilateral regulations and accountability, the lack of care for the lives of innocent people, the lack of willingness to share the burdens of responding properly to the needs of refugees from situations of war and conflict, the use of the international financial architecture for the benefit of the strongest and the richest. The list goes on.

48. Another 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of high significance this year is that of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This has been the common basis for a new beginning after the 20<sup>th</sup> century's world wars and the worst slaughters of humankind. Human dignity and human rights, preserving each person's life and dignity, have to be at the core of our advocacy as Christian churches following the command of Jesus Christ. They should also be the basic concern and message of all who care for the sanctity of life and for the respect for God the creator of all human beings, wherever these persons are or whatever category some would put them in. Racism in all its forms is a human failure to recognize the diversity of humankind as given by God, and it is a sin against God. All the ways we categorize others in order to exclude or discriminate against the other, are per se an attack on the faith in the God of life and love we uphold. This has become and must continue to be a priority for the WCC to combat, in whatever forms it might appear.

Even our own high-ground objectives of unity, justice and peace are sometimes reinterpreted or abused by powers to dominate or to discriminate. Through a serious dialogue among us, even a critical one, we can discern when they are serving the love we are called to promote.

49. Unity, for example, might become a means of enforcing an oppressive uniformity or demand for agreement, or a frontier, a border, a wall against others that are not included in the protected and unified area or country. This might happen even in the churches, not serving primarily the needs of those who are suffering or supporting those who are struggling. A reference to justice is in some cases seen as the rule of the stronger and privileged, neglecting the needs of those who are excluded from having the safety of citizenship with equal human rights. Peace, too, might be defined as an objective but pursued by some in practices dividing and creating conflict. This might happen by getting total dominion over the other or less powerful or privileged, as we have seen in the attempts to make Jerusalem an "undivided capital" for Israel before an international and bilateral agreement with the Palestinians is even on the table.

50. There are strong powers undermining the need to see one another as participants in the one humanity, seeking our common good and our common interests. There needs to be somebody and something that represents a counter-power of unity, justice and peace and that expresses nonpartisan, universal love.

51. The expectations of the WCC in this respect are strongly felt and often made explicit. We can make a difference as churches together, as people of faith, hope and love. Somebody must and we can believe there is another and better way, the way of love.

52. The WCC and our partners should have more resources to act even more adequately in these challenging times of the world. We are relevant even if we are not able to respond to all in the way we wish. We do not present ourselves as the perfect communion, nor as the oracle that knows everything and has every answer to every complicated matter in this world.

53. We are not shy as WCC to present ourselves as a fellowship of churches, as people of faith, sharing the vision of something better, something built on another scale of values, something that binds peoples and nations together out of mutual respect, dignity, accountability—even love.

### **3.4 The WCC contributing to the holy work of peace-making**

54. The UN with its many agencies, as well as other international organizations, are calling for our contributions every day, more and more. As the WCC, we represent member churches on the ground, in the many realities where change and transformation must happen. We respond daily through our comprehensive programmes, such as EHAIA and EAPPI, and in peace initiatives for all our prioritized countries – and even more. We try to see the conflicts from the side of the suffering, particularly from the perspectives of children and women, from all peoples who are victims and targets of violence and armed conflicts. We are called to serve for the sake of the peace that all human beings need and deserve.

55. We have in the WCC during these last years made efforts to focus more on our common calling and mission, and searching for expressions of unity in addressing the needs for justice and peace in many conflictual contexts. Our very significant discussions and definitions on “just peace,” e.g., from the Convocation in Jamaica in 2011, are of high relevance and must be implemented in many ways.

56. One of the great fears of our time and for the future is the fear of the impact of climate change and other destructions of our environment. The WCC has been involved in many initiatives for a “just peace with the earth.” The commandments to love God and our neighbour cannot be explained without focusing on how we should love creation itself, the nature to which we belong and on which we are totally dependent.

57. These initiatives for peace and justice are expressions of our love for others and for future peace and justice for our world. When ICAN, the campaign for the banning of nuclear weapon, received the Nobel Peace prize last year, we were happy to show that this is our agenda, our campaign and our policy in showing our love for human beings, the civilization and the environment, which are threatened by any use of nuclear weapons. The lack of support for this initiative reflects a regrettable lack of commitment to use all means and possibilities to spread information and understanding on what a nuclear attack would mean in terms of irreparable disasters. We need to nurture attitudes of accountability and love for the one planet and the one humanity that expresses itself in real disarmament also by the nuclear states.

58. The conflict in the Holy Land calls upon all who can contribute to a real and just peace. The anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel and the beginning of the tragedy for the Palestinian peoples happens to be the same year as our anniversary. The call and commitment to continue working for the people in the Holy land and for their future in just peace continues every day in the WCC and with our partners. The plan to renew and strengthen the WCC efforts from the executive committee last year is about to be implemented in different ways in the coming years and months. The role of the local churches is significant. The role of the churches together internationally and ecumenically is as needed as ever. We should strengthen even more our efforts to use our role as international partners for inter-faith dialogue in the interests of a just peace.

59. The many initiatives and visits by different groups representing the WCC to our prioritized countries, such as Colombia, South Sudan, Burundi, Nigeria, Egypt and several other places during these last years are expressions of our pilgrimages and our longstanding involvement in and commitment to peace initiatives, particularly where churches are involved or called upon and where the unity of the churches in these efforts is particularly important. They show that the presence and accompaniment of the ecumenical family are of utmost significance and that we should continue contributing through our means and perspectives to the needed peace. These peace initiatives are reported in different ways through statements, news releases and other communications. Some of them are explicitly addressed in the public issues statements from the executive committee, and some are prepared and will be expressed through this meeting.

60. I have personally participated in several of these peace efforts and pilgrimages, most recently in my visit to South and North Korea. We heard again how important the on-going involvement for peace in Korea and the WCC's visions for peace are inspiring these efforts we see these days. We will hear more about the unique momentum for peace on the Korean peninsula from media and from our participants in this meeting.

### **3.5 The ecumenical movement of love – expressed in ecumenical diakonia**

61. These joint efforts, even if they are not always as successful as we want, are bringing us together in new ways and are a common expression of our service – our *diakonia* – for justice and peace.

62. The UN has defined the Sustainable Development Goals toward 2030. We can with great pride say that many of them are pursued in the programmes and activities of the WCC. Many of them are pursued in close collaboration with our ecumenical partners, particularly the specialized ministries and ACT Alliance.

63. The way we have shared our responsibilities in the ecumenical movement must be expressed also through a shared understanding of what ecumenical *diakonia* is. This has been our intention for a while, and the WCC has been leading in developing a longer document for reflection on what ecumenical *diakonia* is historically, theologically, and strategically today. This document is presented to you to be received, discussed, and supported for distribution and active use in our member churches and with our many partners. It has already achieved a very positive response in a strategic ecumenical forum last year with many of them and in other contexts, as well as among many of our partners, including the ACT Alliance.

64. This document is a great opportunity to show that we want to be the leading agent of an ecumenical movement of love – that is, showing the love of God in practical actions together. The ecumenical challenges and potential are to be addressed now, and we have a great opportunity to move forward together now in a better grounded and better developed, shared vision and strategy. We will also have a unique opportunity to explore that vision further in a common day between the ACT Alliance assembly and the WCC executive committee November 1 in Uppsala, Sweden.

### **3.6 The WCC moving toward the 11th Assembly**

65. To be convening the ecumenical movement of love not only means sharing a vision but also identifying concrete steps to move forward. We seek the shared wisdom and guidance we can offer together, being mindful of how we do so in a modus of love and respect, and exercising our stewardship for decisions in the best possible and reconciled way.

66. This has been expressed in our principles and practice of consensus. This practice has become a gift to us, and an expression of mutual respect and love.

67. Even in issues where we, in accordance with our rules, make decisions by votes (for the sake of transparency and to secure the equal involvement of all members of the central committee), we need to make efforts to conduct the procedures in mutual respect and love for one another as a fellowship of churches. This has been emphasized also by the Permanent Committee on Consensus and Collaboration (PCCC) in regard of important decisions to be made by this meeting of the central committee (cf. their report).

68. Important decisions must be taken at this meeting about the 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the WCC, to be held in 2021. In this phase of the preparation, we should keep in mind that the assembly is really the gathering of the whole fellowship – the only means to do so every eighth year (as it is now after the new constitution). Wherever it is held, it is the assembly of all of our member churches, not only of the region or the country or the confession taking the particular responsibility and task to host it. It should be prepared so that we all own it, have access to it, have resources to pursue it, and are represented there. It should be planned with a programme so that we all feel at home, inspired by this, our shared gathering.

69. It is really a serious burden for those who take the responsibility to be hosting an event like a WCC assembly. That some churches, and even more than one church or group of churches, have invited the WCC to organize it in their context, is a privilege for the WCC. Even more: it is a condition for the WCC to be able to have an assembly that some churches request to host it. These are signs of love and care for the fellowship of churches that we represent. The two invitations, from South Africa and from Germany, represent this, and they both represent contexts of significance for our legacy and are of high relevance for our challenges of our time as fellowship.

70. Furthermore, the WCC assemblies are milestones on our journey, our pilgrimage. We move from place to place, from context to context, from continent to continent. Last time we were generously invited and hosted by our Korean member churches, supported also by other churches in the Republic of Korea.

71. It is important that the fellowship, represented by you as our central committee, take time to prepare and make these decisions about the assembly venue in the manner of fellowship and love for the fellowship as a whole, not as a competition for one to win over the other, like in the Olympic movement. I have been asked to prepare the decision-making process together with the executive committee in a manner of prayer and deep respect for the fellowship we are serving together, and I trust that we all share that intention.

72. The principle and practice of rotation from region to region for these events is a sign of being a global fellowship of love and unity. The assembly has not been in the European region since the 4<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Uppsala in 1968, but it has been twice in the Asian region, twice in the African region, once in the Latin American and once in the North American region since then. Many say it is time for Europe now, when we have a serious invitation to that region. The WCC can affirm and participate in the important on-going processes of reconciliation and just peace in South Africa. However, that does not overrule the need for making the assembly an expression of the worldwide fellowship, alternating between regions as venues for the highest and widest expressions of its fellowship. The WCC can acknowledge the offer from some of our member churches in South Africa, and honour the significance of these processes of reconciliation by asking them to host other WCC events than having the next assembly there. This can happen in events before or after the 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly.

73. The offer from EKD and the church in Baden also shows their strong commitment to contribute to the whole fellowship, in the spirit of the first years of the WCC, when the German churches were seeking reconciliation and new beginnings in the fellowship with other churches after the tragedies of World War II. Today the churches in Germany are actively addressing the huge challenges for justice and the need for expressions of love for refugees from Africa and the Middle East. The issues of Europe today are also the issues of the whole fellowship, in many ways. The situation in Europe today makes it quite relevant to have an assembly analysing and addressing the many challenges for the churches and the human fellowship in this region – from the perspective of the one global ecumenical movement of love.

74. The resources the member churches in Germany can make available for the preparation and pursuing of this assembly would also help to support the full participation of all member churches in the next assembly. This is a relevant perspective in a time when we have many severe demands on our financial reserves due to other great tasks we undertake in the next years with our buildings here in Geneva and the reduced incomes for the period of transition, till we have the full benefit of securing funds for the future of the WCC through these undertakings. For you as the central committee, the highest governing body responsible for the total stewardship of the work and the resources of the council at this moment, it is important to see these dimensions of the work of the council as well.

75. The central committee will also make a decision about the *theme* of the assembly. The assembly planning committee has carefully begun preparation of the assembly, and in their report they offer three alternatives. The committee points to the fact that the word “love” has never been used in an assembly theme. The proposals from the APC are in different ways expressing how the WCC is and should be an expression of the ecumenical movement of love. One of them does so more explicitly than the others, as the word “love” is expressly articulated.

76. Taking care of our resources and assets are expressions of stewardship and love for those who come after us. The WCC has been leading the churches' advocacy and witness in Geneva in the context of international institutions serving the multilateral work for justice and peace. This is a privileged place to be, and we have the privilege to steward this legacy in our time with a significantly increased involvement with other partners here and more public attention and interest. This responsibility means also taking care of the resources and the real estate we have here. In a critical situation for an overdue revision of the WCC pension fund, we have as the WCC, with the mandate of the decision-making bodies, addressed this crisis of the WCC by developing a building project on the real estate here.

77. This has been pursued with resilience and success, with sincere love for the council and its sustainability, supporting those who serve it now and in the future. We now have the area plan approved, and the first phase of the project is launched for the investors and tenants. The value of our property is already three times what it was before this project started. This is duly reported in another document and will be presented in another session. I see this as a way to use all our efforts and available support and competence from inside and outside to find the best way of saving the WCC from a financial crisis and breakdown and of stewarding this property for the future generations of staff and work of the WCC. The chapel and this hall have been classified as historical monuments in Geneva due to their special history and architecture.

78. A personal remark at the end: I love the work of the WCC and love to work with my colleagues and you as governing bodies as general secretary, in deep gratitude for the privilege of serving in this ministry with the trust of you and our member churches. I have shared with the leadership of the central committee in due time to prepare this meeting (according to the rules) whether I am "available for re-election for another term." After prayers and a long time for reflection, my conclusion is that I am not ready to say yes to a third five-years term. Due to the sequence of the central committee meetings, I had to make this decision long before the end of my term, and without knowing what God will call me to do thereafter. I urge you to not see this meeting as a farewell, but to acknowledge my clear intention of continuing in the present mandate you have given me, pursuing all the important tasks and processes of the WCC during this time.

## Conclusion

79. We are privileged to work in the World Council of Churches, as an expression of *the ecumenical movement of love*.

80. It is a significant dimension in how we should read our 70 years' history. It is a significant dimension in shaping the role and work of the WCC today for the sake of unity, justice and peace. And it is the perspective that should guide the WCC toward its next assembly and beyond. Nothing less and nothing other than love.

*"So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).*