

FACT SHEET: Church Leaders' Pilgrimage to Japan on 70th Anniversary of the Atomic Bombings

Who? Leaders from member churches of the World Council of Churches in seven countries: United States, Germany, Japan, Republic of Korea, Norway, Netherlands and Pakistan. The head of the delegation is the vice-moderator of the WCC Central Committee.¹

What? This pilgrimage is for church leaders from nuclear-dependent states which are currently making historic choices for or against outlawing nuclear weapons.

The pilgrimage includes learning, reflection, prayer and action. The delegation will meet with atomic bomb survivors, church members, leaders of other faiths and government officials in Japan. The leaders will return home to bear witness to what they have seen to government officials, their churches and the public.

The journey is part of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace adopted by the 2013 WCC Assembly in Busan, South Korea. The impetus for it is the need for Christians to “move together” in unity and mission. The A-bomb anniversary pilgrimage combines spiritual disciplines with civic responsibilities. It invites participants to not only move together but also to “move” their governments' positions together as well.

The assembly plenary on peace explored the exodus from nuclear dangers as an exemplary pilgrimage related to justice and peace. Then, in 2014, the WCC Central Committee said that to use the energy of the atom in ways that threaten or destroy life is sinful, and that Christians in nuclear-armed and nuclear-dependent countries have a particular obligation to their governments, namely, to “refuse to accept that the mass destruction of other peoples can be a legitimate form of protection for ourselves”.

When and where? The delegation visits Hiroshima, Japan, on 5-7 August and Nagasaki on 7-9 August 2015 for the commemorations of the atomic bombings on 6 and 9 August 1945. After the anniversary observances, the church leaders' will complete the pilgrimage by returning home to meet with their own governments.

Why? August 2015 is a highly significant milestone. It is timely because most of the survivors of the 1945 attacks are now in their 80s. It is urgent because all of the nuclear powers show little sign of fulfilling their obligation to abolish nuclear weapons, and all are modernising their arsenals for decades more use instead. It is promising because, since 2012, a growing international majority is emerging to do what the nuclear states refuse to do and actually ban nuclear weapons. Churches are involved.

The seven member churches on this pilgrimage are especially well-placed to take such a stand for peace. Their governments avow support for nuclear disarmament, but all continue to rely on the very weapons that caused such destruction 70 years ago and pose a threat to humanity today. The United States, which bombed Japan, is represented. So is Pakistan, which has its own nuclear arsenal outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The other six governments rely on US nuclear deterrence, either as NATO members, or, in the case of Japan and Republic of Korea, as US allies in the Pacific. Hence, churches from this group of countries are well-placed to apply long-standing ecumenical policy opposing nuclear weapons and put constructive pressure on their governments today.

Recent developments have made the trip and its purpose more timely and relevant. At the UN in May, the five-year review of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty collapsed. The nuclear-weapon states mounted sharp resistance to the widely supported humanitarian initiative against nuclear weapons that

was the most positive and widely supported element of the conference. A WCC story on what happened is [here](#). The spectre of nuclear threats has also risen because of the Ukraine crisis.

How? The eight states represented on the pilgrimage face a critical decision concerning the humanitarian initiative mentioned above. It calls for governments and civil society to join and “fill the legal gap”ⁱⁱ for the prohibition of nuclear weapons. The pilgrimage invites church leaders to translate what they have seen and learned about the human impact of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki into a focused, timely and coordinated lobby of their respective governments. Their voices are raised in concert with many others who are stressing the need for governments to begin negotiations in this 70th anniversary year to ban nuclear weapons on humanitarian grounds.

To the degree that it is successful the church leaders’ lobby will strengthen the growing majority of non-nuclear-weapon states that support the humanitarian imperative to ban nuclear weapons (159 states via joint statements; 113 states so far via the new Humanitarian Pledge).

The pilgrimage will entail site visits, discussions, an inter-faith symposium, interviews, video testimonies, news articles, social media, letters and meetings with up to eight governments. The itinerary and programme are being coordinated variously with member churches, other religious groups, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons and civil society partners.

The pilgrimage will conclude by relating the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to policies of home governments—raising questions with government officials for discussion and future reference. The core concerns include:

- Why is our government still prepared to use weapons that destroy whole cities and put humanity at risk?
- Why are nuclear weapons still legal when other weapons of mass destruction are banned?
- When will our government endorse or otherwise align with the Humanitarian Pledge to close the legal gap around nuclear weapons?

The US allies represented on this trip have generally welcomed the humanitarian initiative. It is consistent with widely held values they espouse. Now, however, as the initiative has grown into a broad multi-lateral coalition, they feel obliged to stand with the US and the doctrine of nuclear deterrence instead. It is an uncomfortable position for them and their important ally.

Summary. This pilgrimage will seek to bring a moral and spiritual critique of the dilemma that began with the attack on Hiroshima 70 years ago to governments that still depend on nuclear weapons today. The goal is to emphasize to foreign policy officials the current potential for change, namely, to align with the majority now forming to establish a ban on nuclear weapons on the basis of humanitarian law and end the unsustainable nuclear status quo. The pilgrimage is charted so that churches may work effectively for peace across borders and serve global civil society as agents of the common good.

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ⁱ Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, United Methodist Church. Other delegates: Rev. Dr Chang Sang, Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, WCC Asia president; Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, chair of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD); Tor Berger Jorgensen, Church of Norway; Rev. Karin van den Broeke, Protestant Church in the Netherlands; Bishop Samuel Azariah, Church of Pakistan; Rev. Baekki Heo of the Korean Christian Church in Japan; Rev. Dr Stephen Sidorak, United Methodist Church ecumenical officer based in the USA and member of the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs. Archbishop Nathaniel Uematsu of the Anglican Church in Japan is with the delegation for part of the programme.

ⁱⁱ “Fill the legal gap for the prohibition of nuclear weapons” is the core of the pledge issued by the host government at the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, December 2014. The internationalization of Austria’s pledge by governmental support in every region offers an eventual pathway towards negotiations to outlaw nuclear weapons.