

Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity

A reflection on the theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Karlsruhe 2022

In 2022, the World Council of Churches will gather in Karlsruhe, Germany, for an assembly. Assemblies are moments when the churches within the fellowship of the WCC, responding to Christ's prayer "that they may become completely one" (John 17:23), call one another to visible unity for the sake of the world that God loves and for the sake of the creation that God declares good.

The context in which we will meet

The 11th Assembly will meet in the heart of Europe, in Karlsruhe, Germany, a country with much wealth but, like so many, reeling from the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of the people: personally, economically, and spiritually.

This assembly will come after a time of waiting because of the global pandemic, a virus that has exposed and highlighted both the vulnerability of all humankind and the profound inequalities and divisions among us. The world has been awakened to the ugly realities of privilege and oppression, of economic, social, and ethnic injustices.

In the shadow of this experience, the churches will come together, in response to God's call, to hold a light of hope and to celebrate the love of God the Holy Trinity, a love made fully manifest in Jesus Christ that moves people to reconciliation and unity. In the times in which we now live, we will ask of one another, "How does a church – in whom the love of Christ is pleased to dwell – organize, speak, and act in this season?" and "How, in this moment, shall we share together in God's mission of love to the world?"

Since 2013, the common calling of the churches has been expressed as a pilgrimage of justice and peace, and there will be much to recall and to celebrate with joy as we reflect on all that has happened in our walking together since then. The assembly will also be a time to find inspiration for the next steps of the journey – steps to be taken under the banner of the love of God, the Holy Trinity; a love revealed in Christ; and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, a love moving in and through all humankind and all creation.

The global pandemic has taken many lives and challenged profoundly the ways of life that many have come to count as "normal." In the face of tragedy and death, we have rediscovered our dependence on one another, the limits of individualism, the challenges of globalization (that enable the spread of a virus so readily), and our mutual responsibility for one another (and sometimes also our fear of one another).

At the same time, war and poverty continue to bring much misery, suffering, and death. The changes in our climate, unheeded by most for decades, now provoke a new level of fear among some, while

already they bring disasters and threats for the very poorest in the world. Politics is changing fast, among both rich and poor communities, and democracy itself, to some, seems tired and often an empty promise. The multilateral spaces and collective decision-making processes at the global level are rapidly shrinking and are sometimes forgotten as we face profound crises.

Those who are in Christ, living out the love of Christ which is working in us, are called to do so in this world, to be an eschatological community, living as a sign and a foretaste of the kingdom to come and making visible the love that fills our hearts with joy, even on the bleakest days.

The assembly will be a time to gather strength for our common pilgrimage in the world in its present reality, to hear from each other, and to encourage one another as we celebrate the love that, through the Holy Spirit, moves, heals, and empowers us.

Together, immersed in love for Christ, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and lifted up by God who is the source of our very being and of all creation, the fellowship of churches will find strength for the journey and hope for the future. We will search for ways to respond to all who believe themselves unloved, unregarded, and unnoticed and to bring God's love to the lost, reconciliation to those in conflict, and unity to all who are divided at the same time as we rejoice to receive those gifts and blessings ourselves.

“Christ’s love . . . ”

The biblical and theological bases of the theme

The theme “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity” is directly inspired by 2 Corinthians 5:14¹ and draws on the very heart of the gospel that offers to the world the depths and wonder of the love of God the Holy Trinity. It is rooted in God’s design for the unity and reconciliation of all, a design made visible in the incarnation of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

For Paul, who wrote to the Christians in Corinth, Jesus Christ is not simply a Galilean teacher or the founder of a new and exclusive religion, but the cosmic and universal Christ, in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). Out of love for us and for the whole of creation, God became flesh, assumed all the suffering and passion of humankind and of the whole created order to heal us, restore us, save us, and reconcile us with God. Our faith proclaims that “God is love” (1 John 4:16) and that, in Jesus Christ, this very love of God has been revealed to the world.

As the eternal Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, so we are called to be “in Christ” and to dwell with Christ in the love of the one, holy, and eternal God. The church, as the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23), receives, lives in, witnesses to, and shares that love with others so that peace, justice, and unity may be poured out in all the places where the children of God now cry out from their suffering and from places of injustice and violence.

The theme of any assembly sets a frame around the gathering of the fellowship and offers a picture of our life and journey together, setting the direction for future travel. It becomes an effective way for the churches to see anew their common call to seek the communion (*koinonia*) that is God’s gift and promise, to shape their service (*diakonia*) to the people of the world and to creation, to commit themselves to God’s mission of love to the world (*missio Dei*), and to give words to their common prayer for each other and for the whole world (*leiturgia*).

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:14a: “For the love of Christ urges us on . . . ”

The theme set for the 2022 assembly in Karlsruhe reminds us that the church, as the body of Christ, is moved by Christ himself – whose love for the world, which was the very love of God, was so deep that he gave himself up even to death for its sake. As we are moved by what is revealed and given through Christ’s love, so we are given the gift of loving Christ and, through him, all that God has made. Being “in Christ,” we are not simply inspired to love but blessed with the gift of love. In 2 Corinthians, Paul tells the early church that “the love of Christ urges us on.”

Gospel texts and many passages in the whole of the New Testament – many of them to be studied throughout the assembly – show us how the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ was first witnessed and interpreted by the early church. A key text is Matthew 9:35-36, which describes what Christ’s love, revealed and exercised in his ministry, looked like. We read that

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

We see in this text the Christ who is moved by compassion, moved profoundly “in his guts,” the one who brings good news, healing, and hope to those who are “harassed and helpless.” His love is not only for his immediate disciples, but much more widely for the crowds, for those in all the cities and villages who had gathered in the wilderness to listen to his teaching, and for all those whom God has made. This love is not only the love of an inspiring human being but is the love of God revealed in and through him. This divine love is expansive, deep, bringing practical and life-transforming hope. It is this kind of love, the love of the one in whom God is made present in the world in all its woundedness and brokenness, that moves both church and world.

The assembly will provide an opportunity to reflect profoundly on the meaning of Christ’s love – and to find ourselves, and the love we both receive and offer, renewed and reimagined through Christ’s loving gaze. We will discover together how love is not (as it is so often framed) simply a sentimental or romantic feeling but may be a participation in the love of God revealed in Christ: love that is redemptive, self-denying, and sacrificial, as well as practical and active in bringing change for the good.

“ . . . moves the world to reconciliation and unity”

Responding to the challenges of our times moved by Christ’s love

An assembly of the World Council of Churches is a place where we gather as a fellowship from all over the world, and the cries and needs of the world come with all of the participants and delegates. As churches, we are signs to the world of God’s kingdom to come: we seek to respond concretely to the many challenges of our times and to become disciples whose lives are transforming the world.

But what shall we say about the world that Christ’s love moves? What in the life of the world, in these times, challenges our faith, our witness, and our search for the unity of Christians and the unity of humankind and creation?

COVID-19

The whole world has shared in the experience of facing a global pandemic. So many have died, and for many more COVID-19 has brought sorrow, fragility, and profound anxiety about the future.

This has been a ruptured time that has brought us to our knees, with many people and communities experiencing profound trauma, with some even so desperate as to take their own lives. We have been humbled by these events. They have revealed to us how much we need connection with each other even while, to prevent infection, we must stay distant from one another. All people are in need of love and support, but love becomes harder to express and make vivid in such times.

COVID-19 has also exposed how the assumed self-sufficiency, independence, and individualism on which so many have come to rely, particularly in the West, are but illusions. It has made plain that we human beings are not the masters of creation but part of creation and vulnerable within it.

The pandemic has also brought more clearly into the light many of the inequalities in the world and has heightened our sense of the most significant challenges of our times. Churches, too, have struggled to know how to continue in worship, in celebration of the sacraments, and in service to the world, and have sometimes argued within themselves or with the state about how they should be faithful to God and God's people.

The world resounds with many cries of pain, suffering, and protest from communities and peoples, as well as from creation itself. All over the world people are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." And upon all the people of the world, particularly upon the poor who suffer most, as always, Christ has compassion.

Climate change

We live in a world where the climate is changing, and changing because of what human beings have done.

The earth, our common home, is suffering under human domination. Many people, especially young people, now speak of a climate emergency. From the top of Everest (garbage) to the bottom of the oceans (plastic), from Siberia (record high temperatures) to the Kilimanjaro (its "eternal" snow is disappearing) and the Pacific islands (many may be submerged), the planet's vital signs show the consequences of the lives so many have lived. Many species are now facing extinction, and the rich biodiversity of creation, on which we all depend, is under serious threat. We have learned that a life without limits brings destruction without limits.

For many scientists, the earth is today in a new period of its history, called the Anthropocene, in which the impact of human domination, especially during the past 200 years of industrialization, can no longer be reversed. Humankind has failed to take care of creation and now the love of God for all creation, made visible in Christ, calls out for change and for our repentance. Nonetheless, as those in Christ, who is the first fruits of a new creation (as a renewal of the earth), we have an irresistible hope for the future.

Inequalities

We live in a world still dominated by a global economy that concentrates wealth in the hands of a very few and deepens inequalities between and within nations. Such inequalities have only been deepened and strengthened by the pandemic. In some places, countries have been brought to the edge of economic ruin, since coping with a pandemic on top of so many challenges seems to be the last straw. In some places, governments and peoples are tempted to face inward, to draw back from international agreements and aid, and to "feed our own."

This worldwide reality is at odds with the biblical tradition of compassion for the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner as signs of faithfulness to God's covenant with God's people, a tradition embodied

in Jesus' compassion for those living "in the margins" as sheep without a shepherd. In recent years, many churches and ecumenical organizations have been calling for a new "economy of life" through a new international financial and economic architecture.

We have also become witnesses of terrible atrocities and seen powerful protests against the inequalities that white supremacy supports and that racism fuels, as the world hears the prophetic voices that proclaim that "Black Lives Matter."

In his recorded message to the delegates of the seventh annual G20 Interfaith Forum, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I stressed, in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement, that *"every human being's God-given infinite worth . . . cannot be reduced to market value, to a mere product for exchange."* He also noted that *"human dignity does not have color, gender, age, ethnicity or religion. Everyone has the same value and therefore respect for and equal treatment of human persons must be provided at every time and every place . . . We would like to use this opportunity to raise our voice against structural inequalities, any form of expression of racism, ethnocentrism, tribalism, casteism, and classism. The policy makers and those who do policy implementation need to know that we call for zero tolerance of injustice and any other form of discriminatory practice."*²

The digital revolution

The new digital-technological revolution sweeping the world may be much more radical in its consequences than the previous industrial revolutions. It is changing at high speed the way we live, work, and relate to one another. It serves well some of the needs of peoples who can no longer be physically present to each other, enabling communication and working across many boundaries, but also raises profound and uncomfortable questions about our understanding of what it is to be human.

The movement away from face-to-face communication may, in some instances, lead to new forms of estrangement among us. We may, in the future, find ourselves apparently able to overcome human physical and mental limitations such that what we mean by "human" today may no longer correspond to what being "human" will be like then. Artificial intelligence, algorithms, machine learning, biological research to create more "perfect" human beings, the development and use of robots – all these raise new questions about human freedom and identity.

A loss of hope and confidence in the possibility of a better future

In a world where many have lost faith in their governments, in international forums, or in cooperation and where many have seen an erosion of human rights and freedoms, there is a need for a revival of hope and vision for the future. Recent years have seen a turn in the world toward self-centredness and separation rather than unity, toward localism rather than the universal and international, and an increased value placed on difference and identity rather than on the oneness of all humanity.

The world groans in pain because there is violence between peoples, because there are so many refugees and landless or persecuted peoples, because women and children suffer violence, and because so many are hungry and vulnerable and afraid. Before so much suffering and injustice, the world's governments and organizations seem to have limited effects and may even deepen the suffering and wrong.

Yet the pandemic has also evoked, in many places, an impressive and moving response: as neighbours help neighbours, as governments and health organizations work to bring relief, as scientists labour to

² As reported by <https://www.romfea.gr/oikoumeniko-patriarxeio/39899-oikoumenikos-patriarxis-kaloume-se-mideniki-anoxi-apenanti-stin-adikia>

find and test a vaccine, and as nations work together. There are signs that the world needs, and cries out for, a renewed sense of solidarity and hope. There are those searching for ways to make real and tangible, on the public stage, the love that has enriched so many of our personal and private lives. We live in a world in which when it comes to such things as climate, poverty, and health, we are as one. The pandemic has made this truth plain.

The world cries out for peace and justice

The world in which we live, and in which the World Council of Churches assembly will meet in 2022, is one marred by many kinds of injustice and by the pain of many of its people, its creatures, and even the earth itself. There is terrifying war and violence in many places – sometimes, tragically, even enacted in the name of religion – while people continue to pray and long for peace. There is stark inequality and unfairness, when a few feast while many starve. There are many ways in which human beings continue to exercise domination over others, to heighten prejudice and exert power to exclude and oppress. The resources of creation continue to be exploited and abused, when repentance and renewal are called for from all of us who share this common home.

God's first and foremost attitude toward the world: Love

But in times like these, as those who are in Christ, we are never without hope, even as we are faced with such great challenges. Indeed, we have such gifts and blessings from God that we know we do not struggle alone and that we do not have only our own resources to rely on. God is working in the world and within God's people in the church. The WCC Faith and Order text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, in its final chapter, reminds us that

*The first and foremost attitude of God towards the world is love, for every child, woman and man who has ever become part of human history, and, indeed, for the whole of creation.*³

This “foremost attitude of God” is made flesh in Jesus Christ: in the compassion he lived in his earthly ministry; in the mystery of his incarnation; in his suffering, dying, and being raised again to new life; and in the promise of the future renewal of all creation. And this love, the love with which he loved and the love he makes possible in us, is the gift of God to the church and to the world. It is this love which inspires, moves, and creates all that is possible in the life of the church as it becomes a sign of God's love for the world.

The theme of the assembly does not explicitly mention the church and leaves open just how the love of Christ might be made manifest so that the world might be moved. The church may need to have a certain modesty, since not all its people and in every way always make visible the profundity of the love of God. But the church may rejoice that, in God's design, it is a new creation, sign, and servant of the mission of God to the world, and this mission is rooted always in love, expressed and founded in the faith proclaimed by the apostles.

The life of the church, in its worship and service to the world, is called to be a sign of the love revealed in Christ and lived out by the apostles through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the love that can move the world to reconciliation and unity. The unity of the church, as witness to reconciliation, is also always to be identified with and connected to its service in and for the transformation of the world. An earlier WCC text, *Church and World*, expressed it like this:

³ *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214, §58 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.221/page/32/mode/2up>

In offering its common life in the service of God and God's love for the world, the church has also constantly to struggle both through its presence alongside those who suffer and by its action on their behalf. In this sharing of God's love the church enables them to perceive the suffering love of God in Jesus Christ for them, and the church itself is led to a deeper experience of that love.⁴

It is this love that inspires those who follow Christ to draw closer to one another in the unity that is God's gift. Love inspires communion and love draws us to one another. Christ himself, for love of Jerusalem, cried out,

"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!" (Luke 13:34)

Love, more than ideas and ideals, gathers, inspires, and creates unity. The church is a sign of this sacrificial love of Christ in the world, and the people of the church are servants of the gospel so that, through their love, both in attitude and practice, they may inspire those beyond the walls of the church. This witness does not come from human effort alone and is not founded on a romantic and naive notion of human aspiration but is made possible by the love of Christ working in us.

Christ, out of love, prayed for the unity of his friends and disciples (John 17). He prayed "that they may be completely one," not only for their own sake but also so that the world might believe. What the church is to be and what the church ought to do are two sides of the same coin. The church is one, according to the scriptures and the apostolic faith, and is also called to be a sign of unity for a broken world.

From the heart of the loving Christ comes the prayer for unity. In Christian worship, the eucharist conveys the reality of the love of God made known in Christ through the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection. It is this love that moves Christ's followers to love not only one another, but also the world for which he died. Christ moves his people to love the world that he loved and to become a sign of the healing, reconciliation, and unity for which a broken world cries out. The witness of the apostles is that Christ breaks down all the familiar markers of difference and division.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28)

The church witnesses to the love of the triune God who loves, who is loved, and who is love.⁵ The church shares in the unity at the heart of God and offers itself as an eschatological sign and servant of the promised unity of God's fulfilled and glorified creation. The unity we seek is therefore not simply a kind of common project based on shared aspirations, but is founded in the love of God that draws us together and unites us.

It is a cause for lament that our present disunity, our lack of love for one another, and our own need to be reconciled make us, in the church, sometimes a poor sign and servant of the Christ who calls us to be one, but this is the challenge before the church, and the promise and hope too.

When churches find unity, they do so not only as witnesses to the world, but as part of the world that God has made. Already, within the church itself, the world is being gathered into unity. As Church and World puts it,

⁴ *Church and World*, Faith and Order Paper 151, §38 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.158/page/32/mode/2up>

⁵ An allusion to a suggestion made by Augustine, according to the Western tradition, in his work *De Trinitate*.

What is gathered, reconciled and renewed in the church is, in fact, “world” in its estrangement from God and therefore this renewing process continually refers back to the world and forward in its final redemption.⁶

Christ’s love, even as it brings unity in the church, is moving the world to reconciliation and unity.

An ecumenism of the heart

This is the first time that the word “love” has been part of a WCC assembly theme. What might it mean for the ecumenical movement to be shaped by the heart as also by the head, to live in imitation of God’s foremost attitude toward the world – love itself?

Many people among the churches are urging that our seeking for unity must not be only intellectual, institutional, and formal, but also based in relationship, in common prayer, and, above all, in mutual affection and love. It must also always be rooted in the faith of the apostles, of those who were given the new commandment to “love one another,” while the Christ who called them friends (and not servants) washed their feet (John 13).

This same Christ urged that “they who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me” (John 14:21), so that love is never simply an emotion but is grounded in faithful and transforming discipleship.

As human beings, we know so well that unity and love belong together. The very word “communion” (*koinonia*), a word that we often choose above the term “unity,” implies the kind of unity that happens when people love one another. In our most intimate lives we may experience, if we are truly blessed and if it is our vocation, the wonder of the kind of love that brings human beings together in such a way that they are made one – not just physically but, we might say, spiritually. And there are many relationships in our lives in which we know how close unity and love can be.

Love draws us to one another, makes us want to be together, to share everything we have, to make a new community, to bring forth life and to stand beside one another even when trouble comes and when suffering is deep. Love and communion go hand in hand. Unity and love are found together. Love draws us into union.

The focus on love does not only unite us together as Christians but also draws us to a deeper relationship with all people of faith and all people of goodwill. Love as a theme that flows through different faith traditions has provided strong foundations for service and the pursuit of justice that transcends boundaries.

In love we are attentive not only to our own but also to the “other” – making neighbours out of strangers through radical hospitality and solidarity. Love as the language of our faith can actively and prophetically engage the world as we see and experience it today in a way that will make a difference for a shared tomorrow.

Our existence as Christians in a multireligious world calls us to live out Jesus’ command to love our neighbours by embodying a faith that is at once rooted in passionate commitment and eager for expansive dialogue. As the text *Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During COVID-19 and Beyond*, which was jointly produced by the WCC and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, reminds us:

Our faith becomes alive in action that lives out Christ’s love . . . It keeps our faith and our mission alive and active, it shapes our life as Christians into a loving sign

⁶ *Church and World*, §14.

of Christ's presence, and it builds love and understanding between us and those with whom we join together to express our love in action.⁷

We learn, too, that love is much more than emotion and feeling, that it is tested through time and is about a commitment of the will and the intellect as much as an expression of emotions. Love is something that Christ even commands of us; it is not something we can only “fall” into. It is as much about our politics, our actions, and our careful thinking as about our feelings. It is, as St Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:1-7, 13), patient and kind, not insisting on its own way, not resentful, rejoicing in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

In the pilgrimage toward Christian unity, we have sometimes assumed that when we know ourselves to be fully and visibly united, when that great day comes, we shall then be able to love each other fully. When we can know that we share the apostolic faith, when we can recognize within one another the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, when we can gather around one table, then we shall be able to love one another.

But until that time, perhaps our communion will be possible, and we will be moved to receive it, as we begin to love each other – not just theoretically or abstractly, but in ways that are visible and thoughtfully made present, that anyone looking at us could see. This would truly be an ecumenism of the heart.

Conclusion

The ecumenical movement has always been about the churches calling one another to visible unity, to full communion. Today, when because of a pandemic even meeting in person has become so difficult, that vocation is all the more needed.

The churches need now, together, in a renewed ecumenical movement for the sake of the world, to find a more public voice to speak a truer hope than the empty optimism of any faded political rhetoric: a hope that might build a better world than the one so deeply shaped by materialism, individualism, and consumerism, a world in which resources will be shared, inequalities addressed, and a new dignity found among us and for all of us.

Churches that live and pray only in hidden, private communities, separated from one another, are called by the risen Christ to be “sent” into the very public and open spaces of the world, to reframe our corporate sense of what matters, to make idols fall, and to be part of welcoming the kingdom of God in which the poor are blessed and the captives set free. A world crying out for profound love, for community, for justice and hope needs churches that are visibly in communion, longing for oneness where there is division and finding a new future for humankind and for all creation, as expressed in Revelation

Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity. The theme of the 11th Assembly is *a song of praise* for the God whose love, in Christ, moves us. It is *a statement of belief and trust* that it is the will of God to move us by love to reconciliation and unity. It is *a message* to the world about the love that is the heart of the Christian faith. It is *an invitation* to the churches and to all people of goodwill across the world to share in the common wisdom of love to move us all to be reconciled and to find our true unity as humankind.

⁷ World Council of Churches and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During COVID-19 and Beyond* (WCC and PCID, 2020), 17, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/serving-a-wounded-world-in-interreligious-solidarity>