

Together for water

Newsletter of the WCC Ecumenical Water Network

January 2021

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear readers, we are delighted to start the year 2021 by launching our monthly newsletter "Together for water". By now, we all know that protecting ourselves and others from COVID-19 has a lot to do with good hygiene. Yet some 3 billion people still lack a basic handwashing facility in their homes. It is an important reason why poor and vulnerable communities are at much higher risk of contracting COVID-19, and many other infectious diseases, than the rich.

The worst of the COVID-19 pandemic may be over soon as vaccines are being rolled out in many countries. Yet the global water, sanitation and hygiene crisis remains a considerable challenge. We hope that this newsletter will be a platform for our network members to exchange their stories of water justice and a way to inspire each other in making the human rights to water and sanitation a reality for all.

I am also happy to announce that the former coordinator of WCC Ecumenical Water Network (EWN), Ms Maike Gorsboth, helps us produce these newsletters in collaboration with WCC communications and the members of the WCC-EWN International Reference Group.

Dinesh Suna, Coordinator WCC-EWN

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Students tending plants at one of CSI's "green schools".
Photo courtesy of USPG.

Has your church ever challenged you to build a mud pit?

It is what the Church of South India (CSI) is asking all its parishes and schools to do - to harvest rainwater and increase awareness of water use. "In both life and ministry of our church, CSI would like to promote sustainable development practices and build power for change," explains Professor Mathew Koshy Punnackad from CSI. Read full article: "Feature: a new generation with new values"

GLOBAL UPDATES



Photo: Peter Williams/WCC

Syria: Water used as weapon of war

Different parties to the war in Syria are using water as a weapon in the war that has afflicted Syria since early 2011. WCC's project teams in Syria have provided information as well as field testimonies from civilians about the situation in the al-Hassakeh region, where people have become victims of the instrumentalization of the water supply by the warring parties.

Such deliberate disruptions of water and other essential services are unacceptable violations of human rights, stresses the World Council of Churches (WCC) Ecumenical Water Network. "Water is a gift of God. It is a grave sin to use that gift as a weapon of war. It is a sin to deprive people of the water they need to quench their thirst and to subject them to increased risks of illness and death from the coronavirus during this pandemic time," said Bishop Arnold Temple, chairperson of the Ecumenical Water Network.

[Use of water as weapon of war a direct attack on human rights, says ecumenical water network](#)



Pedro Arrojo-Agudo. Photo by: AralInfo | Diario Libre d'Aragón / CC BY-SA

New special rapporteur stresses value of water, reaches out to faith organizations

Mr Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, a Spanish economist, member of parliament, and award-winning environmentalist, is the new UN special rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. Appointed by the UN Human Rights Council, his role is to monitor, advise, and report on issues related to these human rights while investigating violations and conducting country visits.

In one of his first public statements, Mr Arrojo-Agudo expressed concerns about the creation of the world's first futures market in water, saying it could invite speculation from financiers. "You can't put a value on water as you do with other traded commodities," he said. "Water belongs to everyone and is a public good."

Jointly organized by the WCC-EWN and the Special Rapporteur an [online roundtable meeting of faith-based organizations took place on 18 January](#). Part of a series of consultations with different stakeholders, its objective was to discuss the vision of the Special Rapporteur's mandate and issues to focus on during his first three years. The roundtable, a first of its kind, was welcomed and well attended by representatives of different faith-based organizations. As it was held under the Chatham House Rule to encourage free and constructive dialogue, details are not being reported here.

[Water: Futures market invites speculators, challenges basic human rights - UN expert.](#)

REGIONAL UPDATES



Green Anglican and Cuban doctors during the cleanup.
Photo: Green Anglicans

South Africa: #bigfalsebaycleanup

Over 200 people from many different churches recently joined hands to clean up beautiful False Bay in the southern part of Cape Town. Home to dolphins, seals, whales, surfers, and swimmers the bay is a treasured part of Cape Town life where many go to spend family time.

The clean-up on the 5th of December was organized by the #together4creation group. At one of the clean-up sites the volunteers were joined by a group of Cuban doctors and the clean-up ended with a spontaneous dance festival!

[Full story here](#)



Photo: NCCI

India: Saying no to indifference and injustice

"Unfortunately, the faith communities worldwide, but particularly in India have approached the issue of sanitation and toilets in the wrong way, by relating it to something sacrilegious and impure, and thereby have relegated it to an untouchable sphere," said Rev. Asir Ebenezer, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in India.

During an online gathering on World Toilet Day (19 November), religious leaders and representatives from civil society highlighted that religious communities needed to care more about the plight of the 4.2 billion people living without access to safely managed sanitation. Participants from the Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church in India, National Council of Churches in India, and World Council of Churches discussed how sanitation in India is linked to climate change, stigma and taboo related to casteism.

[Combating "blatant injustice," religious communities work to bring safe sanitation to all](#)

[Bishop Arnold Temple reflects on World Toilet Day \(2020\)](#)

Please contribute!

Is your church or community planning an activity on or ahead of World Water Day? We'd love to know about it! Do you have any other water-related news, updates, a prayer, or photos that you would like to share with the WCC-EWN? Please contact us at water@wcc-coe.org

REGIONAL UPDATES



Bryanna Baker-Meckley (left) at a water retreat co-hosted by CJM.
Photo: CJM

USA: Access to water not a given

Did you know that access to water is an issue even in one of the wealthiest nations in the world? “Access to clean, drinkable water is a human right that my community is being denied,” reports Bryanna Baker-Meckley who lives in rural Appalachia in West Virginia. “Most are living in poverty and do not have higher education. We are being denied this right due to our silence and lack of power.”

Bryanna’s testimony was shared with WCC-EWN by Creation Justice Ministries (CJM). Millions in the USA suffer from insufficient access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Bryanna shares how she felt helpless until Concord University and CJM helped her understand that having access to water is a human right. Now she is passionate about water issues and advocates for her community, and others, to gain access to clean water.

[Bryanna Baker-Meckley: Water, A Gift from God and Human Right.](#)

Read also: [America’s Clean Water Crisis](#) (TIME, 20.2.2020)

Brazil / Switzerland: Water observatory for the protection of the River Pardo

The large-scale cultivation of eucalyptus and the irrigation of the huge coffee and sugar cane fields – all for export – are causing the water of the Rio Pardo River and its tributaries in the two Brazilian states of Minas Gerais and Bahia to dry up. Dams and excess water extraction for large irrigations are already leaving local communities without water for people and animals to drink. Swiss Church Aid (HEKS) supports rural communities and grassroots organizations whose access to land and water is threatened. “To ensure the right to water for the local population along the river, we urgently need legislation that protects the Rio Pardo, the right of access to local communities and expand good preservation practices,” said Karl Heuberger, water officer at HEKS.

“It is very difficult to achieve anything without reliable information about what is happening to the river. That is why we want to enable civil society to monitor water quality and availability,” explains Heuberger. HEKS therefore supports local initiatives to create a water observatory network for the entire Rio Pardo region. For this purpose, families are trained by specialists and equipped with the necessary measuring instruments. HEKS Brazil is accompanying the work on site and has also taken over the financing.

[Kleinbauern-Gemeinschaften verteidigen ihr Recht auf Wasser](#) (German)



Young activists in the municipality of Água Preta. Photo: HEKS

UPCOMING



Photo: Sean Hawkey/WCC

17 February: Seven Weeks for Water 2021

As in previous years WCC-EWN invites you to use the season of Lent to reflect on water with our weekly theological reflections and other resources on water for the seven weeks of Lent and for World Water Day on 22 March. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Seven Weeks will be launched during an online prayer service with participants from all over the world on 17 February, Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lenten season according to the western Christian calendar.

The WCC’s Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace will have a regional focus on the North America rRegion in 2021. Accordingly, the Seven Weeks for Water this year will take us on a pilgrimage of water justice in the North America region. We will reflect on Flint, Michigan where drinking water contaminated by lead; Standing Rock, where the Dakota Sioux have successfully fought the destruction of sacred waters by the Keystone pipeline, and the Navajo Nation, where lack of water for handwashing has heightened the toll of the COVID pandemic in the Southwest.

We will also reflect on other less talked about places in North America, searching for water justice from the verdant valleys of California to the salmon streams of the Pacific Northwest. Our guides will be theologians and water justice activists from diverse confessional traditions from the North America.

Find out more about the Seven Weeks for Water Lenten campaign and sign up to here: [Link to the new website](#)

22 March: World Water Day “Valuing Water”

World Water Day is a day to reflect on the importance of water, to remember those who lack adequate drinking water supplies and to strengthen our commitment towards making safe water for everybody a reality as soon as possible.

This year’s World Water Day - 22 March 2021 - is about what water means to people, its true value and how we can better protect this vital resource. Be part of the important discussion about the meaning and value of water. Let us raise our voices to underline that water is not a commodity like any other! You can send us your short answers to the question, “what does water mean to you? What is the spiritual / ethical significance of water in your own religious tradition?”. You can also use the tag #water2me and share your responses on social media. If you do, please do not forget to tag #WCCEWN.



Photo: Sean Hawkey/WCC

Feature: a new generation with new values

Green church movement in India hinges on “a new generation with new values”.

Prof. Dr Mathew Koshy Punnackad was one of the pioneers who initiated the “green church” movement in India in the 1990s. Today, he is the director of the Ecological Concerns Department of the Church of South India (CSI). In an interview with the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Water Network, he talks about caring for life on earth as a spiritual commitment, about “greening” the church, and the importance of education for sustainable development.



Students tending plants at one of CSI's “green schools”.
Photo courtesy of USPG.

Dr Koshy, you were a chemistry teacher. What was it that motivated you to become an environmental activist?

Dr Koshy: My attitude and approach to chemistry took a new turn when I visited Minamata in Japan in 1989. People living there were heavily affected by two diseases, the Minamata disease and the Itai Itai disease, both related to the chemical pollution of the water. I realized that I could use my chemistry background to take action to save nature and I was really encouraged to do more research on environmental issues.

In the end, I got my doctorate with a thesis on river pollution. I also started working among fellow Christians to make them more eco-literate. At the beginning, some listened to me, some ridiculed me. As I acquired scientific as well as theological insights, I was able to communicate more effectively.

You say caring for life on earth is a spiritual commitment for you. What does that mean to you?

Dr Koshy: The story of Noah and the flood states that God made the covenant not just with human beings but with “every living thing” and desires all creatures to “be fruitful and multiply.” Creation and all the earth’s creatures are clearly important to God. We are called to be equally clear about our commitment and covenant with the earth as central to our commitment and covenant with God.

Like Moses and Elisha, we seek to be God’s agents of healing and restoration to those affected by ecological degradation. If we want to protect people’s rights, also the rights of future generations, we must include rights related to God’s creation, like the right to an intact ozone layer or the right to clean water. Without these rights, all other rights ultimately are lost. What is the point of rights in society if the earth becomes unliveable?

CSI is engaged in a major effort to become a “green church.” What does that include?

Dr Koshy: In the life and ministry of our church, CSI would like to promote sustainable development practices and build power for change. Our green protocol provides guidelines to our parishes and schools on how to be more sustainable in all their activities, be it weddings or the construction of new buildings. We have established model eco-centres like the CSI Synod Centre in Chennai and our Othara campsite in Kerala state. The centre in Othara, for example, has a rainwater harvesting unit and it produces green energy from a biogas plant.

By 2022, we plan to create our first group of climate-resilient schools and communities. Students at participating schools will follow the green protocol, commit to carbon neutrality, practice climate mitigation and adaptation. These children will also transform their houses in the same way they do at school—a community transformation through students!

What role does water play in all this?

Dr Koshy: Water conservation is a key part of our green church programme. Our members are planting as many trees as possible, also plants like vetiver, jatropha, and mangroves. That improves the green cover, which is important for replenishing groundwater, controlling erosion, and reducing global warming.

We ask our parishes and schools to dig at least one mud pit to harvest rainwater falling on their rooftops. That way rainwater is being filtered and seeps into the groundwater. The idea is to fight water shortage and to encourage people to be more thoughtful of where their water comes from and how they use it.

You mention schools. What is your approach to education regarding environmental issues?

Dr Koshy: We are currently converting more than 1,000 schools run by CSI into green schools because we want people to learn how to live sustainably. Our green schools project moves beyond theory into practice. We do not just tell students that they should use water with care, to name but one example, but we let them put that into practice in their everyday school life.

Students are involved in eradicating plastic waste, organic cultivation, water conservation, and many other sustainable practices. Our green audit involves all teachers and students and uses practical methodology touching on many parts of the official curriculum, such as producing data on how much water is wasted and how to reduce that waste. We see that students are changing because of the programme. A new generation is being built with new values.



Switzerland: More church organizations join Blue Community movement

Five more Swiss church institutions have joined the Blue Community movement: the Protestant Church in Switzerland (PCS), the reformed parishes of Kirchdorf, Wülflingen, city of Zürich and the Ecumenical Academy in Gera. By becoming Blue Communities, they commit to recognizing water and sanitation as human rights, to phasing out the use of bottled water and to promoting publicly financed, owned, and operated water and wastewater services.

“Without water there is no life. Having or not having access to water determines life or death,” affirms Damian Kessi, External Relations Officer at PCS. “Water is a gift of God, offered to all so that they may use it responsibly for fullness of life. By becoming a Blue Community, the PCS commits to this promise and to the protection of public access to water for present-day and future generations.”

Find out more on the Blue Community movement:

<https://canadians.org/bluecommunities> (English)

<https://www.bluecommunity.ch/was-ist-eine-blue-community.html> (German and French)

Photo of the month

Blessing of the Waters, Istanbul



By Jennifer Hattam. Istanbul's small Greek Orthodox community celebrated Epiphany on 6 January, much as it usually does, with a cross thrown into the waters of the Golden Horn and young men diving into the water to retrieve it. The feast of the Epiphany and the traditional rite of Blessing the Waters is part of celebrating Christ's baptism in the Greek Orthodox faith. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year only two swimmers competed for the honour of bringing

back the cross thrown into the Golden Horn by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. Jennifer Hattam, a freelance journalist based in Istanbul, Turkey, kindly gave us permission to use the photo.

Do you have a photo that tells a story about water? Please share it with the EWN community by sending it to water@wcc-coe.org

A moment for water



Photo: Sean Hawkey/WCC

Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Waters of Life

Excerpts from common prayer at the English-speaking congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Geneva on Epiphany by the Rev. Terry MacArthur

When the light broke forth over the waters of creation, it did not need to call attention to itself. It shone forth from your Word, the Light of the World. Gracious God,

we thank you for the waters of life.

When Moses brought the people through the sea to freedom, he did not proclaim himself the hero, but celebrated with Miriam your victory. Gracious God,

we thank you for the waters of life.

When your people were in exile, and you sent prophets with a word of hope, they did not extol their exquisite poetry, but looked toward an anointed one, who would bring your Spirit near with good news for the oppressed and release for the captives. Gracious God,

we thank you for the waters of life.

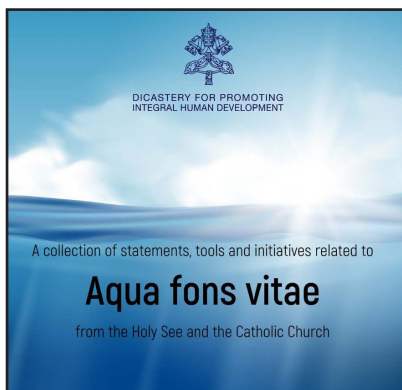
In the fullness of time, you sent a man called John to prepare the way. Although he attracted great crowds, he insisted he was not the center, announcing "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." Clothed in rough camel's hair, he baptized the Messiah, witnessed the descent of the Spirit, and heard your voice from heaven. Gracious God,

we thank you for the waters of life.

You have called us your own, washed us whole, and given us your word in which to dwell. By the wisdom of your Spirit, point all that we do and say toward the gift of your love in Jesus Christ, so we find ourselves free, giving ourselves away, able to drink from the well that never runs dry, offered without money or price. Gracious God,

we thank you for the waters of life.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES



A collection from the Vatican on Aqua fons vitae

The Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development has published a collection of links to statements, publications, tools, and more related to water by representatives and bodies of the Catholic Church and the Holy See. Included are also links to inputs from two conferences co-organized by the Dicastery, one of them on the topic "Governing a common good: access to drinkable water for all" in 2018. Many resources linked to in the collection are available in several languages.

For more information and to download the collection [click here](#) (Website of the Dicastery)



The Ethical Corporation Magazine

The November 2020 issue of Reuter's The Ethical Corporation magazine looks at how companies' growing thirst for water is imperiling people and planet and how companies from different sectors – ranging from mining and agriculture to manufacturing - are responding to growing water risks.

<https://reutersevents.com/events/reports/docs/magazine-november-2020.pdf>

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**World Council
of Churches**