



FOR ACTION
EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY

Original

Moderator's Address

1. Introductory Remarks

Sisters and brothers, I greet you in the name of the Risen Jesus Christ. It is a great joy to meet again after so many months and failing to gather officially as scheduled in March 2020. Once again I welcome you on behalf of the leadership of the central committee and on behalf of the executive committee.

Our gratitude is to the former general secretary, the Rt Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, who has since assumed the responsibility of presiding bishop of the Church of Norway for leading our opening prayer. Aware that the circumstances may not be as conducive, thank you to all those who will provide leadership during this central committee.

a. Focus of my address – As leadership we are delighted to meet with each one of you as we update ourselves on the situation of individual churches and countries as well the life of the fellowship. Further, in a brief manner, I revisit the promise of ecumenical historical legacy in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as a sign of encouragement to all of us and a gift to propel us forward. Another aspect of my address provides a glimpse of how the global church is coping with the impact of COVID-19 pandemic as they continue to rely on their spiritual staying power amidst very hostile and life-threatening conditions. Finally, I share a few proposals regarding WCC moving forward in so far as the election of the general secretary is concerned.

b. The Historical Ecumenical Legacy – “We intend to Stay Together”.

Reflecting on our present situation including attendant challenges, the story of the formation of the World Council of Churches and the contextual trends that impacted the process and Christians as a whole, it dawned on me that there were disparities and differences. However, the historical legacy inspired me and, in a way, points to signs of hope for the church today. After establishing WCC as an organization, it provided vision, a sense of purpose and search for unity for the church and humanity in post-World War II that has remained a reference point for over 70 years.

The WCC 70-year anniversary celebration was a time we were reminded of the difficult historical epoch. European countries and the world were emerging from the most brutal war that devastated churches, communities; divided countries into victors and vanquished; turned leadership upside down as its authority was undermined; massive reconstruction with the support of Marshall Plan; restoration of the “soul” spiritual life of Europe including administering massive humanitarian services to the needy, homeless, unemployed, etc.

In spite of hostilities, fear, and loss of millions of lives, church leaders of the day overcame big obstacles and prayed together, shared bread/meals, as they focused on the prayer of the Lord Jesus “that they may be one.” The war left “Christian Europe” scandalized, broken into pieces and a demoralized people. Out of the war emerged new organizations, for instance the Bretton Woods institutions, responding to the needs of the day.

Finally, after consultations, leaders and churches that had been separated and divided by the war, gathered in 1948, prayed and experienced a living fellowship. This experience, the mood of the day and the desire to

accompany and be in solidarity with each another is captured in the motto of this first assembly namely, “we are committed to stay together” no matter the challenges. The leaders overcame their fears, forces of division and the burden of massive infrastructure destruction and humanitarian needs. We encounter courageous leadership of the day that trusted that God would make a way for a living fellowship of churches and designing strategies to build, strengthen and grow together as a fellowship of churches.

As we highlight the challenges facing our churches and communities and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the fellowship of churches – an impact that bears some resemblance with post WWII – the historical ecumenical legacy provides lessons to draw from as we seek to keep the momentum of the ecumenical movement.

2. Pertinent Challenges Today

“Be thankful for all the struggles you go through. They make you stronger, wiser and humble. Don’t let them break you. Let them make you.” (Unknown author).

a. Global economy in crisis with a likely unequal recovery – COVID-19 has, with alarming speed, delivered a global economic shock. It has had devastating effects on women, the young, the poor, people employed informally, and those working in contact-intensive sectors. Per capita incomes in the vast majority of emerging market and developing economies shrunk in 2020, tipping many millions back into poverty. According to The International Monetary Fund (IMF), there was an estimated 3.5 percent contraction in global GDP in 2020 – the deepest global recession since the Second World War. As a comparison, during the global financial crisis in 2009, world economic output fell by just 0.1 percent, although this number hides large differences between countries.

With more effective infection control and vaccine deployment, the world economy is expected to recover in 2021. However, the speed and strength of the recovery will largely vary across regions depending on access to medical interventions, effectiveness of policy support, exposure to cross-country spill overs, and structural characteristics of countries entering the crisis. For instance, China is forecast to continue its rapid growth in 2021, Latin America and the Eurozone will lag behind. As for the Sub-Saharan Africa, real GDP per capita is expected to contract to levels only seen during the 2008 regression by the end of 2021. As a consequence, COVID-19 could push as many as 34 million people into extreme poverty in Africa, erasing at least five years of progress in fighting poverty.

b. Surges in Public debt

To limit long-term damage to the economy and facilitate the recovery, governments largely chose to pursue expansionist fiscal policies, hence creating budget deficits and increasing public debt. Following on an already-precarious situation before the pandemic, the debt-to-GDP ratio in developing countries is expected to rise in the years ahead, increasing the threat to debt sustainability. These debt-related strains will add to broader social fractures around the unequal sharing of crisis and recovery burdens, by income group, occupation, region, age, gender, ethnicity, and geography.

c. Sharp decreases in global trade and financial flows to developing countries – The global health and economic crises have generated steep contraction in all private financial flows to developing economies. The World Bank estimates remittance flows to low and middle income countries are expected to decline by 7.2 percent to \$508 billion in 2020, followed by a further decline of 7.5 percent in 2021. The hit has been particularly severe in Central Asia, East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, with declines between 9 percent and 16 percent in 2020. Estimates for the decline in foreign direct investment are even steeper at around 12 percent. And portfolio investment, the most volatile flow, is also forecast to decline, posing a threat to the financial sustainability of companies in developing countries.

d. Amplified inequalities – COVID-19 has amplified existing inequalities, in particular with those groups who are most vulnerable. In all regions, there is a marked gender gap in business closure rates as women entrepreneurs have been disproportionately affected by the contraction in economic activities as a result of

COVID-19. Reasons for this include the fact that female-owned firms are concentrated in consumer-facing sectors (services, hospitality, retail, trade) where the demand shock has hit hardest.

The pandemic is also worsening income inequalities within countries. Lower-income workers are less likely to work from home and therefore more at risk of losing their jobs. The IMF predicts that the impact of COVID-19 on income distribution could reverse progress made over the last decade, with the Gini coefficient increasing by 2.6 percentage points in emerging markets and developing economies as a result of the pandemic.

COVID-19 and the resulting lockdowns have triggered a mass migration from analogue to digital and highlight that access to the Internet is crucial for socioeconomic inclusion. Yet, half of the world's population does not have access to the internet, either through a mobile device or through fixed line broadband.

Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, followed by many in emerging and developing economies in Asia, are among those with the lowest access to the internet, despite being world leaders in mobile money transactions. There is also a large variation in internet connectivity by firms in Sub-Saharan Africa – only about 60 percent of businesses use email for business compared to about 85 percent in Europe and Central Asia. This lack of universal and affordable access to the internet is widening income inequality within and between countries.

e. Heightened rivalry, anti-globalization, nationalism, and vaccine apartheid – As the vaccine rollout takes shape, the richest nations have secured billions of doses of COVID-19 vaccines while developing countries are struggling to access supplies. It is estimated that this vaccine nationalism could slow the global economic recovery, costing high-income countries \$119 billion per year. While COVID-19 did not by itself trigger economic, technological, and political competition between countries, it certainly sharpened this set of rivalries, particularly in a context of mounting geopolitical confrontation.

3. Direct Impact of COVID-19 on the fellowship of churches and faith communities

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit faith communities and it has been a crisis moment for the church and particular groups.

The state of religious freedom – Globally, lockdowns and restrictions on gatherings were a characteristic way to curb the spread of COVID-19. Religious gatherings were hugely affected, but some oppressive regimes went further to deal a blow to religious freedom in the guise of preventing COVID-19. Such measures, while necessary to protect the legitimate state interest of preventing disease proportionate to meeting that aim, must not be discriminatory, and must be lifted once the crisis is over. Tactics adopted include harassment, intimidation, and detention of human rights activists, ethnic and religious minorities, and other critics and dissidents. This must concern the global community and a threat to religious freedom, requiring a keen look. Other rising threats to religious freedom include:

a. Rise in Islamophobia – Recently, a driver ran over four members of a Muslim family in Ontario, Canada in what is seen as a continuation of resurgent Islamophobia in Canada and by extension the UK. Statistics in Canada found hate crimes against Muslims grew 253 percent from 2012 to 2015. It got even worse: police-reported general hate crimes shot up by 50 percent in 2017 reaching a new all-time high. These numbers are driven largely by incidents targeting Muslim, Jewish and Black people with increases being driven mainly by events in Ontario and Québec.

b. Rise in Anti-Semitism – Jews continue to face physical attacks as well threats of violence at places of worship and in public. In Germany, a man with a shovel badly injured a Jewish student leaving a synagogue in Hamburg on Sukkot. Likewise, a man wielding an axe entered a synagogue compound in Ukraine, though security guards stopped him before he entered the building; and assailants attacked Jewish families in Argentina and France including a Brazilian man wearing a kippah. Jews were also victims of xenophobic

discrimination. Anti-Semitism featured heavily in Poland's presidential campaign.

c. Persecution of Christians: We cannot overlook the situations experience in so far as persecution because of their faith is concerned. The situation in Northern Nigeria remains as thorn in the flesh where many young school children are kidnapped and a number have not been recovered. Conditions in the Middle East force Christians to leave their homes and the percentage of Christians is dwindled over the years. Migrants fleeing to Europe are massacred in North Africa – Libya; at the same time there are countries in Asia where state policies discriminate those who subscribe to Christian faith. The persecution may not be so evident during this pandemic since lockdowns and other preventive conditions are used as scapegoat.

d. Psycho-social support and economic problems – The faith community has suffered damage to its socio-cohesion structures and never-thought of economic hurdles on congregations, households, and also inadvertent poverty, loss of economic opportunities, educational and even congregational rights. Individual faith institutions and leadership are challenged with limited resources, widowhood, orphanhood, stigma associated with the virus and various marginalized group challenges like mental health surfacing in a big way. With all these challenges, there is a limited and in many cases an unprepared psycho-social support response strategy or mechanism at state and faith community levels to enable early identification and also deal with psychological cases.

e. Leadership gap potential hindrance for faith communities 'watchdog' roles – COVID-19 has claimed thousands of lives globally, some of who were reputable faith leaders. Their loss has thus created a vacuum in not only providing theological leadership but also in standing up to oppressive regimes. Over the years, faith communities have performed the watchdog role especially in times when civil society groups have been silenced. With such losses, it will take time for younger faith leaders to find their grounding in standing up to fill these roles and speaking truth to power in love.

f. Misinformation – The spread of fake news or unverified information has, in many ways, brought about uncertainty and indecisiveness on the part of those faith-based tools that are used to prepare and affirm the faith community on their preventive, adaptive and mitigation capabilities.

g. Stigma and/or discrimination – Stigma has also been noted within a household or community with a patient or survivor whereby other neighbouring communities may shun members of the 'affected' community. Cases of discrimination have challenged the faith community's doctrine of "Love thy neighbour" and the faith community's value of "I am my brother's keeper".

h. Gender-Based Violence and Early Marriages – The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated key risk factors for violence against women and girls, such as food shortages, unemployment, economic insecurity and school closures. These have led to an increase in multiple forms of violence against women and girls especially physical, psychological, sexual and economic forms of domestic violence.

The impact of the pandemic has been far reaching; besides material and financial resource deficits, church leaders, pastors, church workers and members have succumbed to the virus. Church economy, fellowship and pastoral work have been shaken in addition to the burden of death that has hit the churches.

4. Key opportunities for churches moving forward

The entry point to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is through proper vaccination as has been opined by medical researchers and international bodies. It is thus crucial to understand how religious leaders can help smoothly transition into the new norm. As has been the case historically, religious leaders haven't been adequately engaged in formulating vaccine rollout plans. It is high time we brace for thoughtful, intentional, and urgent engagement with other development and government authorities in vaccination strategies and delivery. Fundamental approaches to enhancing these engagements include:

a. Building trust and relationships with religious actors is the starting point and endpoint. The critical first step is to listen and hear. It is essential to collectively identify and define common ground with other development stakeholders and begin conversations on how to build partnerships in this new norm.

b. Equitable working relations – For the most part of the pandemic in 2020, religious leaders were bombarded with messages and urged to help spread the word in combating misinformation. This realization of the significant role faith leaders can play by governments and development agencies is positive. Religious leaders should participate in formulation of such plans to avoid being recipients of information from other bodies. The need for theological grounding on some aspects of the recovery process cannot be overstated.

c. Church hospitals, nurses, doctors, and administrators are significant assets – Religious health actors and those not directly involved in health, should participate in the rollout – for instance, using religious buildings as vaccination sites or having religious personnel serve on task forces to decide vaccine prioritization and equity. Concerted efforts by global health and development institutions involved in vaccine-demand generation, vaccine readiness and delivery, community engagement, and vaccine equity to join forces in looking thoughtfully and strategically to informed faith engagement as an integral and central part of global and national approaches, a central part of COVID-19 vaccine planning everywhere, in every country.

d. Hope – The pandemic offers opportunity for church leaders to lead their communities and nations with hope. We are aware that the pandemic has compounded already existing deficits and weaknesses in our socio-economic and political systems and policies landscape thus pushing people to the brink of desperation and state of hopelessness. With the loss of a number of church leaders, this COVID-19 pandemic implores us to provide hope and spaces to strengthen the moral commitment to service by both senior and younger leaders.

e. Compassion and empathy with the other – when we pray the Lord's, "Our Father" not my father this implies that God the father whom we share with other believers. The pandemic gives us space to express compassion and show empathy to the other. Resilience cases by churches point to this act as compassion goes beyond the borders and boundaries of our faith community.

f. Covenant over contract – This is the time to partner together to realize certain common goals. Churches exist to offer hospitality to the whole community, welcoming and helping people of all faiths and none to work towards the common good. Hence the transactional approach in dealings between churches, state and development agencies need looking into critically.

5. Resilience by Global church – "Troubled but Not Destroyed"

Churches are definitely troubled by the COVID-19 pandemic and related key challenges but they are not destroyed, despite paying a high price like losing lives of pastors and members. Instead, churches illustrate a high level of adaptability to major changes with little or no support. One local congregation took time, identified most vulnerable groups and mobilized food rationing. In another place, in order to protect people on the margins, food rations were delivered to the doorsteps. Two, many a pastor has been on the frontline offering pastoral services and a number have died and are dying. In particular, pastors in rural communities continued their pastoral visits and accompaniment of vulnerable families like bereaved ones even during lockdowns. In fact, a number of these pastors do not have access to facilities like zoom/internet. Three, youth have played a pivotal role assisting clergy and church workers to use technology in their ministry as well accompanying them in pastoral ministry.

Four, the reach by churches to people often not heard was broadened due to the pandemic as workers applied technology; enabling their voices and those of the church to be heard in boardrooms of the powerful and decision makers; these voices reached to most intimate spaces. It is worth noting churches managed to work outside their silos; delivering humanitarian and spiritual support extended across boundaries and borders.

Five, churches found themselves on the heels chased by technology which in the past was not seriously considered, especially in certain parts of the globe; and the pandemic forced the churches to find ways to share the good news/Gospel electronically as well keep in touch with members.

Let me share a couple of examples of resilience by the church; in the Pacific, communities reverted to barter trade where food was exchanged for services and not for money. Another case is in North America, where the church hosts undocumented workers and migrants who would under normal conditions not access services for lack of legal documents. The church used places of faith as spaces and places for health service provision and treatment. Further, with the use of technology people are speaking and praying together

Limitations – despite adapting to technology, there are limitations; an example is ensuring that human persons in the virtual space are real persons. We are called to be sensitive: as we listen in to the echo chambers, we are also able to listen to lament (Psalm 22); and to be intentional on where empathy is possible if at all.

Safe spaces for lament and room to be able to share stories of hope cannot be overemphasized; including sensitivity and assisting each other in ensuring effective communication when working online is greater because of the level of denseness and tenseness as new systems and mechanisms of accompanying people are required. Our passion for our people because of the power of the Holy Spirit goes beyond technology and requiring inclusivity of the agenda and participation to also enable deep thinkers, women and men able to share their stories.

In conclusion, the pandemic has shown the church is resilient although we still have to address gaps in accessing technology and our call is to be sensitive and assist each other in ensuring mutual communication.

The church is challenged to continue to find new ways to offer mental health services and tackle lifestyle concerns such as encouraging health-promoting churches, promoting church as a space of wholeness and church as a sacred and safe space. Further, churches promote development and sharing of new resource materials to support spirituality of people such as the WCC COVID-19 Prayer Book. If the church leadership of the 1940s overcame the hurdles, we also can if we focus our hearts and minds on the great helper (Psalms 121).

6. The process of the election of the World Council of Churches general secretary

Exercising our governance responsibility, both as leadership of the central committee and as executive committee, has not been easy during the pandemic. I would like to assure you, however, that our primary and permanent concern has been remaining faithful to the common understanding and vision of the WCC, to maintaining the spirit of our fellowship, to preserving our mutual accountability, to cultivating the ethos of consensus, and to always enabling and giving priority to the process of consensus discernment.

It is in this spirit that we have faced the new challenge of organising several meetings of the executive committee; thanks be to God with success.

It is in the same spirit that the executive committee, after careful consideration of WCC rules, decided to convene the central committee by electronic communications with a limited agenda. And thanks be to the Merciful God we are gathered together today to continue our work.

It is in the same spirit that, after thorough consultation with the governance review group and the executive committee, it was decided not to include the process of election of the new general secretary in the agenda of this meeting.

Having listened attentively to all voices and suggestions, we concluded that we should do this during an in-person meeting and not during the first online meeting of the central committee. It was felt that neither the

provisions of our Rules and those of the Supplement to our Rules, nor the spirit and ethos of consensus which constitutes the heart and the backbone of our governance could be fully implemented during our first meeting by electronic communication.

The election of a new general secretary is a feast and celebration for the entire fellowship and reducing the festive character of the event may do injustice to the fellowship, to the Council and not least to the newly elected general secretary. Therefore, it was decided to continue the process of election during an in-person meeting planned for the beginning of next year 2022.

Concluding Remarks: “We are committed to move together”

Today the COVID-19 pandemic impact includes separation of people; churches have not fellowshiped in person. Unlike the WWII time, technological improvements have facilitated wider communication. In spite of the tremendous challenges e.g. gaps in technology, financial, vaccine access; and demise of church leaders, churches have shown determination to remain faithful to the 10th WCC assembly motto, that is the commitment to move together.

In a time where the world faces an historic set of challenges, the church must step up and be seen and heard in the public space, seemingly now more than ever. In the field of several players, it is time to re-assert and even strengthen the voice of WCC. Like weaving the mat of life requires a common thread that holds together the mat. Likewise, unity of the church brings strength and the string that holds us together as we move is the love of Christ; that love enables unity of purpose, a common witness and the ability to speak with one impactful voice. The task ahead of us is huge, but so is the opportunity for the church to re-establish itself in new ways, to reach new people with the love of Christ, and support the vulnerable and those in need.

By God’s grace “We are committed to stay and move together”!