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## **Report of the Moderator**

**Witnessing Together to Christ's Compassionate Love**  
Dr Agnes Abuom

### **1. A living image of one humanity**

1. Dear sisters and brothers, dear friends,

What a great joy to see you all here in Karlsruhe in Germany:

- Delegates and leaders of our member churches,-
- Representatives of churches, ecumenical partners and
- Leaders of other faith communities working together with the World Council of Churches (WCC) for the unity of humanity
- Assembly participants and guests -  
the household of God's people – young and old – from all continents of the earth.

2. You are a living image of all humankind in all its diversity. You bring with you stories of people struggling for justice and peace and of communities working for reconciliation and unity. I am looking forward to listening to these stories of transformation and hope. I am eager to hear how Christ's compassionate love has motivated you and encouraged you. And together with you I will every day celebrate the signs that Christ's love really moves the world to reconciliation and unity.

3. We know, however, that cheap reconciliation and superficial unity are not enough. We need to confront ourselves with the world as it is, broken and marked by human sin. You bring with you the pain and the trauma of people suffering from violence and war. You carry the burden of communities divided by hate speech, racism, and ethnic tensions. Your villages and cities, forests like the Amazonia jungle, fields and rivers are deeply affected by the climate emergency and economic exploitation. There is hardly a family that has not been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Living together in this world, we are the World Council of Churches on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace; a pilgrimage whose inclusivity has been secured by the World Council of Churches.

5. We have come to Karlsruhe as pilgrims. The assembly is the place where we can share our hopes and anxieties, accompany and support each other, set new directions for our journey, and witness together to the love of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## 2. Why are we gathered here?

6. Why are we gathered here in Karlsruhe on this station of our pilgrimage? Let me offer you four reasons:

First: We are gathered here because we are disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. As disciples of Jesus the Christ, who announced good news to the poor, we firmly believe that his compassion for those who are on the margins must be lived out and proclaimed in a world increasingly marked by individualism and indifference towards those who are vulnerable, be they God's creation or our neighbours. It is the situation of those who are poor and marginalized that shows the quality of relationships in any single community or even entire societies. Their suffering exposes the lack of mutual care and love for the neighbour, and points to the urgent need for justice, peace, reconciliation, and unity. In this sense, in our times, the discipleship of Jesus Christ is counter-cultural.

7. Second: We are here because we belong to different communions of the disciples of Christ, which are not all in full communion with each other. If we are not in full communion as churches, we do not bear a clear witness to the biblical promise of God's reign: the end of all pain, the advent of peace, and the reconciliation and unity of all things in the one who overcame the powers of destruction and death. We must repent and manifest everywhere in the world, in the power of the Spirit, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church that we confess in the Creed. The unity statement of this assembly will be an important step forward in that direction.

8. Third: We are gathered here because we believe that human beings, regardless of their gender and the colour of their skin, are created in the image of God and have equal dignity. We are here because we believe that the living Christ whom we follow is not only the head of the church but also the head of the new creation. Because we believe so, we are called to work hand-in-hand with people of other faiths or of no religious faith who are equally committed to a politics of radical compassion for the end of every single war or conflict, for greater economic justice, for the healing of creation, and for the wellbeing of future generations.

9. And fourth, we are gathered to conduct the business of the World Council of Churches, namely: to meditate, to reflect, and to evaluate our mandate and work of the period since the WCC's 10th Assembly in Busan. Through prayer, Bible study, analysis of current issues, reflections, and discussions, the assembly will provide guidance on the future work, witness, and strategic positioning of the World Council of Churches.

10 Do you agree with me? Then let us keep these four reasons always in mind during the coming days as the shared basis of our deliberations. Let us be clear: This, the WCC's 11th Assembly, is more than the highest decision-making body of the WCC and the most representative gathering of Christians in the world. At its best, the assembly is a spiritual celebration of the power of God's love to renew our minds and hearts so that we may become a countercultural force driven by solidarity with the most vulnerable people and God's creation.

11. In other words, the assembly as a global gathering is a moment, a space, to celebrate, pray, meditate, reflect, and work to ensure that the soul, heart, and spirit of the fellowship and of humanity is kept alive, ignited, and renewed and not lost in the midst of the political or socio-economic injustices of the season. Spiritual celebration and celebration of life, sharing our joys and pains at this assembly, is of uttermost importance as we emerge from a period of imposed isolation because of the COVID-19 pandemic for nearly three years. Even more tragic is the demise of our loved ones whose memory we cherish. You agree with me that it is by God's grace that we are here alive to continue the pilgrimage! Our task is continue the pilgrimage, in God's grace.

12. So many young people are anxiously struggling for life in justice and peace, and for the future of our planet. They go onto the streets here in Germany and in many other parts of world to voice their fears about the limited time left to save the planet, among other things. I beg you to listen carefully to youth among us, so that we do not disappoint and fail them but are rather motivated and encouraged by their energy and

commitment. They are the generation that is experiencing the first catastrophes of the climate crisis and the last generation that can take action to stop global warming.

13. We are blessed that we could have the Ecumenical Youth Gathering with around 400 young people which included a youth pre-assembly right before the assembly. This was really a great achievement that will show its fruits during and after the assembly with a strengthened ecumenical youth network. There are about 200 students of the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI) among us, and 150 stewards and 50 young communicators are supporting us. Youth are active participants and we could not run this assembly without these motivated and highly dedicated young people. Thank you all!

### **3. Pilgrims on the Path of Peace**

14. In this spirit, I turn now to the accountability report of the central committee, “Pilgrims on the Path of Peace. The Journey of the WCC from Busan to Karlsruhe.” You have all received it. Please read it carefully. I hope that this document conveys something of the excitement and energy of these years, of the churches learning more about regional contexts and local concerns through Pilgrim Team Visits (PTVs), of the strong partnerships forged to collaborate for climate justice, of reflecting on the promising ecumenical convergence captured in the Faith and Order text “The Church: Towards a Common Vision”.

15. Among other concerns, the report highlights also: the engagements of the churches in the Colombian peace process and the racial reckoning in the United States; the closer ties with the Roman Catholic Church as well as with the World Evangelical Alliance; the challenging vision of a transforming discipleship; and the innovative ways in which the WCC and its fellowship have stayed together in mission and ministry through the COVID-19 pandemic.

16. This document is a precious resource for our deliberations. I will not summarize it now. I will rather share with you what I have experienced and learned on the pilgrimage from Busan to Karlsruhe. I will speak about the gifts that were shared, the wounds I saw, and the spiritual strength and power for transformative action I have witnessed.

### **4. A timely theme**

17. Let me begin with our assembly theme that guides and inspires our reflections: “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” Questions were raised at the beginning of our common journey to Karlsruhe if “love” is not a word that is used so much, so widely, and in so many different senses that it ends up saying little because it says too much. However, we soon realized that it does make sense to speak of love and more precisely of “Christ’s love” in today’s world. Why? Basically, for two reasons:

18. First, because an assembly theme is always about Christian mission, witness, and unity in prophetic dialogue with the spirit of a certain time. The first WCC assembly I was privileged to participate in was the 1975 assembly in Nairobi in my country Kenya. Its theme “Jesus Christ frees and unites” spoke to the struggles for liberation and an end to colonialism in the continent of Africa and in other regions of the global South. When today hate speech is normalized through social media networks; when xenophobia and racism are nurtured by national populisms and politics of fear; when the poor face the consequences of the climate catastrophe and exploitation driven by the lifestyles of a few who are rich, does it make sense to call all Christians and churches to re-envision prophetically their apostolate, their mission, witness, and unity in relation to Christ’s compassionate love? If you need an answer, then please read each morning the Bible study for the day in the book *When He Saw the Crowds*.

19. Second, because meditating on Christ’s love will bring “radicality” to the assembly’s reflections in prophetic dialogue with the spirit of our time. Stories of Christ’s compassion and love for those at the margins of society inspire morning prayers, thematic plenaries, and home group discussions. Jesus’ acts of compassion led to his passion on the cross. The disciples’ memory of Jesus’ compassion led also Saint Paul to write to Christians in Corinth that Christ’s loves urged them to engage in the ministry of reconciliation, that Christ’s love moved them and the world to reconciliation and unity (2 Cor. 5:14-19).

20. This strong commitment to unity and our readiness to search for a common mind in the power of the Holy Spirit marks our deliberations according to consensus procedures. We have seen how well the consensus mode of decision making buttressed with our spiritual life works for the WCC, even under the difficult conditions, on our way from Busan to Karlsruhe—not least in our last central committee meeting where with Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay we were able to elect a new general secretary, and to agree on statements even concerning such difficult issues as the situation in Israel and Palestine and the war in Ukraine.

21. I trust that the assembly theme together with the consensus procedures and our shared commitment to go forward together in unity will also help us to address in constructive ways tensions and difficulties that divide humankind today.

## **5. Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace – a timely initiative**

22. When the WCC's 10th Assembly convened in 2013 in Busan, the churches called each other and all people of good will to embark on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and to engage in transformative action. We are bringing the harvest of this more than eight-year long journey to Karlsruhe to discuss the next steps we need to take in our common witness of Christ's love.

23. The invitation of the Busan assembly to join a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace offered a new metaphor under which Christian churches everywhere could see their work for justice and peace – new or existing – as part of a larger quest, uniting churches everywhere in praying, walking, and working toward God's coming reign of justice and peace. The pilgrimage presented not a new programme or initiative as such but offered instead a dynamic framework for the churches' life and work, understood as a sacred journey of openness, encounter, learning, and collaboration toward the God of life and for a world of peace and justice.

There are three experiences I would like to highlight here:

24. First: The Pilgrimage has shown to us that remaining doctrinal and ethical disagreements, important as they are, should not stand in the way of deepening our collaboration and fellowship given in Christ. We owe to present and future generations and all creation that we address the crises of life we are facing by walking together on the way of justice and peace, witnessing to Christ's compassionate love.

25. Second: The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace offered a new framework to integrate local, national, regional, and global levels of the ecumenical movement with a shared focus on the poorest and most marginalized people in so many places of the world. It has been a very moving experience during our Pilgrim Team Visits to listen to women standing up against violence and male misuse of power in far too many countries of this world. They showed amazing strength sharing with us stories of their courageous struggle for justice and peace, for instance in Columbia and South Sudan. Turning to the most vulnerable people in our communities, I was struck by their resilience, mutual solidarity and spiritual strength celebrating life against all odds. Deeply rooted in their faith in God as the giver of life, in Christ as brother and companion on the way, and in the power of the Holy Spirit who sustains them day by day, they gave me far more than I could have ever expected. They gave me hope that change is possible and courage to trust Christ's unfailing love in the midst of violence, destruction, and death.

26. And third: The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace was conducive to embracing and even accelerating the change that was required by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was pushing the WCC to implement new ways of working together, embracing and utilizing new methodologies and technologies. Staff adjusted rather quickly and kept communication and programme delivery at a high level through the intensive use of electronic media. It was just amazing what we could achieve for instance through hybrid Pilgrim Team Visits to Indigenous Peoples and to communities of people of African descent in North America that helped us to understand their struggles against racism, colonial patterns of oppression, and the ongoing misuse of bodies and minds.

27. I am convinced that the ecumenical movement as a whole will benefit from the approach of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. I saw how the spirituality of communities was unleashed and energized when the global community of pilgrims encountered their sisters and brothers in the various different local contexts and vice versa. In all places it was not at all difficult to explore the given context using the three dimensions of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Celebrating the gifts, visiting the wounds; and transforming the injustices.

28. We experienced this

- In Israel and Palestine, mourning together in front of the separation wall and supporting farmers and communities in their quest for water justice;
- In Nigeria and other places in Africa, listening to women and leaders engaging in interfaith dialogue facing communal violence;
- In Colombia, visiting communities that carry the scars of decades of civil war and are struggling for peace and access to land;
- In India, encountering Dalits in their struggle for equal rights and human dignity;
- Among Koreans yearning for peace and reconciliation in their divided country and among migrants and refugees in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand, and the struggles of Indigenous People in West Papua or the Philippines;
- In Fiji, meeting communities that were forced to resettle because of rising sea levels or were affected by environmentally destructive mining practices;
- Encountering Indigenous Peoples reclaiming their lands and identities in North America and joining hands in the struggle for reparations for the consequences of colonialism and slavery with their sisters and brothers of African descent;
- And finally, this year, listening to the Sami people in Northern Europe, encountering migrants and refugees in Italy, and visiting Armenia and Ukraine.

## **6. Affirming life and human dignity**

29. We began the journey of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace concentrating on four systemic issues affecting people all over the world. These were:

- The climate crisis and care for creation,
- Economic injustice and the struggle for an economy of life,
- Violence and wars and the work for just peace through peace building and reconciliation,
- Racism, ethnic pride, and oppression of women and the affirmation of human dignity.

30. We used these four lenses to understand and interpret the struggles of people today only to learn that they are highly interconnected and affect peoples' lives as a whole. When people started speaking about their wounds and what needs to be done to change the situation, their stories centred on five recurrent themes:

- Truth and trauma,
- Land and displacement,
- Gender justice,
- Racism, and
- Health and healing.

31. They need to be addressed by the WCC as transversals, cross-cutting issues that open up the search for alternatives to the systemic realities of oppression, exploitation, and destruction of the basis of life.

32. Transformative discipleship then requires the affirmation of life and human dignity. Let us say this with confidence and hope and let us take the necessary decisions moving us in this direction so that the ecumenical movement and the WCC will continue to flourish in the future. Let us do this with courage and energy.

33. We are singing in our prayers the wonderful song of Per Harling: “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity. In Christ’s love, there is no fear. The Spirit empowers us to be bold and free!”

34. No fear, dear friends, esteemed sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ! In Christ’s love, we are free! We can and we must be bold and prophetic, standing up for justice and peace. To proclaim Christ’s love and to struggle for human dignity and the life of creation is our call and our mission in this world.

35. Let Christ’s love move us! In Christ’s love lies the key to our unity! Let us continue walking, praying, and working together as pilgrims on the way of justice and peace with the purpose of healing, reconciliation and unity for all. These words have deep meaning and very practical consequences in the context of our recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate catastrophe, and violence and war in Ukraine, Ethiopia, and far too many other places. Our hearts must be wide. Our support and solidarity must be with all people who suffer. This is costly discipleship. When he saw the crowds, Christ had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless.

36. “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity. In Christ’s love there is no fear. The Spirit empowers us to be bold and free!” May this song inspire us in the coming days and the days to come when we return home and share our stories about the assembly.

## **7. Gratitude for the achievements of the central committee and for companions on the pilgrimage**

37. Let me conclude now with personal remarks as the moderator of the outgoing central committee of the World Council of Churches. I take this opportunity on your behalf to wholeheartedly thank all those churches and communities in Germany who have invited us to Karlsruhe and are hosting us in very generous ways. In addition, may I, on your behalf, express our deep gratitude to the German government for their gracious facilitation of this assembly. This gesture makes it possible to secure full participation by member churches.

38. The work of the WCC and, for that matter, the assembly is made possible by the invaluable and incredible contributions of many committed actors. To begin with, I sincerely wish to thank our member churches and, by extension, the members of the central committee for their resilience during the tragic period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes institutional compliance to their fiduciary role as well as their fervent prayers for WCC and the ecumenical movement at large.

39. I am also grateful to our former general secretary, the Rt Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, currently serving as the presiding bishop of the Church of Norway. As general secretary, he faithfully delivered the mandate given to him, not least the 10th assembly call to women and men of goodwill and faith to move together on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

40 Our present acting general secretary, the Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca, has and continues to walk in these footsteps while adapting to the new challenges.

41. My appreciation also goes to the members of the Leadership of the Central Committee (LCC) and the executive committee for the careful navigation of their governance roles. Let me ask you to always remember with gratitude the late Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima who was essential for the assembly preparations throughout. He never tired of calling us to witness to the love of Christ and the unity already given us in Christ.

42. As the central committee, we held many meetings made possible because of the team spirit and work, and the improved art of listening to each other. Christian world communions, regional ecumenical organizations, ecumenical partners and specialized ministries continued to provide essential accompaniment to WCC and member churches in ways that affirm the compassionate love of Christ.

43. It has been a great honour and privilege to work with the Staff Leadership Group (SLG) and the entire staff team of the WCC, some of whom have blossomed during this period. I thank the SLG for its skilled leadership of the council and its careful preparation of governing body meetings.

## **8. Conclusion**

44. As the assembly gathers to reflect on the churches' mission, witness and unity in prophetic dialogue with the spirit of our time, Jesus' compassion for stigmatised minorities, for those for whom little compassion is visible today, will challenge us and our churches to *metanoia*, to conversion, to the renewal of our minds and hearts so that we may become in tomorrow's world a countercultural force driven by solidarity with the most vulnerable towards the survival of God's creation, for which so many young people are anxiously struggling today in Germany and in many parts of the world.

45. In this way, churches will be challenged to seek to overcome their divisions through an "ecumenism of the heart", i.e., an ecumenism in which we look at other churches first of all with the eyes of communion in the love of the compassionate Jesus; with the eyes of common commitment to God's kingdom; and only within the solid foundation of that unity in Christ do we look at what separates them in matters of faith, ordained ministry or ethics.

46. Please receive this day and the coming days in a spirit of prayer and personal commitment to witness to Christ's compassionate love. Thank you.