



FOR ACTION
EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY

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Original

Report of the Acting General Secretary

Dear moderator, vice-moderators, delegates, representatives, advisors, guests and participants, Your Eminences, Your Graces, Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

1. *“Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.”* This is the theme of our 11th Assembly. It announces the love of God in Christ for all creation. It speaks to the heart of our faith and is the reason for our fellowship. It inspires our common calling to walk, pray, and work together for justice and peace, for reconciliation and unity, and for renewal and healing. It affirms that God’s plan in Christ was also the reconciliation and healing of the whole creation. I will say more about the climate crisis later.

2. Through God’s grace we gathered in Karlsruhe, Germany, even though our assembly has been delayed by one year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges of today’s world have shown that the theme is providential. More than ever we see a world that is in desperate need of reconciliation and unity, and in need of the love of Christ, the first fruits of a new creation.

4. As I start my report, I begin with words of gratitude and thanks: to the leadership of the central committee with Dr Agnes Abuom as moderator, and Bishop Mary Ann Swenson and Metropolitan Nifon as vice-moderators. My thoughts go also to the late Metropolitan Gennadios, our vice-moderator, who passed away on 1 June 2022. He contributed to our fellowship in so many ways. I wish also to thank the members of our executive and central committees, our ecumenical partners, and the entire staff for your tremendous commitment and dedication to the WCC.

5. My thanks go also to our former general secretary, Bishop Olav Fykse Tveit, for his spiritual encouragement and for his leadership. Bishop Olav, your leadership provided stability and direction amid the many challenges we faced and for this we are very grateful.

6. Our assembly in Karlsruhe is the third time that we have met in Europe since our founding assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. The last time was our 4th Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968. So we are particularly grateful to our hosts: the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK), and the Protestant Church in Baden, and those supporting the assembly, especially the neighbouring regional Protestant churches, the Catholic Archdiocese of Freiburg, the Union of Protestant Churches of Alsace and Lorraine, and the Protestant Church in Switzerland. The WCC looks back to its long involvement with the German churches, including during the time when the country was divided, and when the WCC was able to maintain the churches from both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic as full and active members of the ecumenical fellowship.

7. I would also like to thank the German Federal Government and the Federal Foreign Office for the generous support that has made possible this assembly in Germany in so many different ways. The address

today of Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier is but one example of the many links between your country and the World Council of Churches.

8. Without all of you, we would not have been able to gather here for the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches.

1. In the midst of the pandemic

9. At the beginning of 2020, when I was asked to take responsibility to lead the WCC as acting general secretary, it was thought it would be only for a short time. It has already been more than two-and-a-half years, and will continue until the end of this year.

10. During these years, we all faced the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has taken countless lives, including many members and leaders of our churches and many ecumenical friends. We continue to grieve for this loss of life. This pandemic has reminded us of our shared vulnerability, and has created a strong sense of solidarity among the churches as a fellowship and with the entire human family. At the same time, the pandemic has amplified existing inequalities, especially for vulnerable groups.

11. The pandemic disrupted the liturgical and pastoral life of many of our churches. However, while it may have separated us physically, it has brought us closer together spiritually. We have learned new ways of working and of using digital and online technologies to meet together. As we move forward, we continue to be challenged to continue adapting, learning, and caring for one another.

2. The Pilgrimage of justice and peace

12. “We intend to move together.” This was the message of our 10th Assembly in Busan. Since then, the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace has become a movement, engaging churches and partners in a common spirit. We learned to celebrate our gifts together; to visit the wounds together, the locations of violence and injustice; and together to seek to transform the injustices we have seen.

13. I am convinced that in looking to the period before us, we must continue our common ecumenical journey as a ***pilgrimage of reconciliation and unity*** as an overarching paradigm that guides the WCC’s programmatic work. Moreover, since reconciliation and unity cannot be achieved without justice and peace, this will be a natural continuation of the ecumenical paradigm that was coined at the time of our 10th Assembly in Busan, but now shaped and aligned in response to the needs of a world longing for reconciliation and unity.

14. The image of pilgrimage speaks to our identity. We are a movement and not a static institution. We are “people on the way.” This very concept has a strong biblical and patristic basis. The first Christians were called “people of the way” (Acts 9:2). We see in the early Christian sources that Christians were called those who walk together (*syn-odoi*), while for St John Chrysostom, the church itself was called a *syn-odos*.

3. A common journey with people of other faiths and of good will

15. We have strengthened our relationships and cooperation with people of other faiths as companions on our pilgrimage of justice and peace, on the basis of our common values in responding to the pressing challenges of our times. I would mention the growth in cooperation with the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), particularly since 2019, and with the World Jewish Congress on the issue of equal access to vaccination.

16. I also want to mention our cooperation with Al-Azhar and Human Fraternity, with Religions for Peace, and with Shia branches of Islam in Iran. I am glad and grateful that we have representatives of our pilgrim partners present here with us and who will later address our assembly.

17. As we look to the next WCC assembly in 2030, we see a period that coincides with the time that is left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Many of our governments promised to help achieve these goals and pledged to work with faith communities and civil society. We take them at their word. The

pilgrimage is an opportunity to continue working with all people of good will, to ensure a better future for everyone and for our common home.

4. Ecumenical relationships are essential

Relationships are essential for deepening the fellowship of member churches and broadening the one ecumenical movement.

18. This WCC fellowship of member churches is dynamic. It is growing, deepening, and uniting. I am convinced more than ever that the WCC remains an essential instrument for engaging the churches and amplifying their common witness as a fundamental expression of fellowship and togetherness.

19. This can be achieved only by strengthening collaboration with ecumenical partners, including regional ecumenical organizations and national councils of churches, Christian world communions, and specialized ministries. I particularly want to mention the witness of United and Uniting churches, and that the Protestant Church in Baden, which has offered so much to our gathering here, celebrated its 200th anniversary as a united church in 2021. We are all instruments of the one ecumenical movement, and we serve a common fellowship of churches.

20. The relationships that nurture this one ecumenical movement have extended beyond the fellowship of member churches, to include churches that are not members of the WCC, and particularly Roman Catholic, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches.

21. The WCC's 8th Assembly in Harare in 1998 gave the impetus for the creation of the Global Christian Forum as a platform for broadening the experience of Christian unity. I encourage the WCC to continue its support for the forum, in which today the WCC, Roman Catholic Church, Pentecostal World Fellowship, and World Evangelical Alliance serve as its "four pillars."

22. In 2025 we will commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the first Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 325. The Nicene Creed is an expression of visible unity in one faith and common life in Christ, affirming our faith in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. This anniversary will be marked by a Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order and I encourage the whole fellowship of churches to celebrate this anniversary and take part in these activities.

5. The programmatic work of the WCC

Everything we do is an important witness to who we are as a fellowship of churches.

23. The accountability report of the central committee, *Pilgrims on the Path of Peace: The Journey of the WCC from Busan to Karlsruhe*, and the Resource Book for this assembly highlight the breadth of activities undertaken in the past nine years. The Programme Guidelines Committee will reflect more deeply on the work of the WCC for the years to come.

24. Here I want offer a vision for how the work might be structured in this period to come. The WCC has experienced many different programme structures over the years. The WCC's 10th Assembly in Busan defined three programme areas and introduced the idea of transversal, or cross-cutting, issues.

25. Based on the experience of our work and its outcomes, and the evaluations since Busan, I encourage the assembly to offer guidelines for the WCC's programmatic work to be more focused and integrated and made up of two programme areas instead of three, while maintaining a transversal approach to cross-cutting issues.

26. The first programme area would include the WCC's work on "unity, mission, and ecumenical formation." It would involve the work of the commissions on Faith and Order, on World Mission and Evangelism, and on Education and Ecumenical Formation. It would also include the work of the Indigenous Peoples Network, the Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, and the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey.

27. The second programme area would include the WCC's work on "public witness and *diakonia*". It would involve the work of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs and the new Commission on

Health and Healing. It would also include the WCC's work on economic and ecological justice, peacebuilding, human dignity, and our engagement with the United Nations.

28. A transversal approach to cross-cutting issues would strengthen church, ecumenical, and interfaith relations, the just community of women and men, the engagement of young people in the ecumenical movement, and our work on overcoming racism.

29. The success of the WCC's work relies, however, on the extent to which it engages the member churches and our ecumenical partners. For this reason, I humbly advise that in the future programmatic structure, the regional desks be revived. Without the direct link with the regions and the work with the churches there, the body of the WCC remains cut off from its members in the regions.

30. We are also committed to do all we can to promote sustainability in our own activities. As I mentioned earlier, the onset of the pandemic involved a rapid shift to online and electronic platforms to maintain the effectiveness of the WCC as global meetings and local and international staff travel were curtailed.

31. While being aware of the many challenges of digital communication, including the potential for exclusion, and the need to uphold a vision of digital justice, I encourage the fellowship to continue to explore and to utilize the opportunities of digital and online communication, to complement our face-to-face meetings and activities.

32. Another example of our work to promote sustainability is the "Green Village," the development of the WCC's estate around its offices in Geneva in partnership with *Implenia*, the leading Swiss real estate services company. In stewarding this resource for the future, the WCC steering committee for the project envisaged a cluster of buildings, "like a village," where people would gather, and which would foster dialogue and exchange. Sustainability is the hallmark of the project, ranging from water management to the sourcing of local food, locally sourced wood, and the use of geothermal energy and solar panels.

6. Addressing together the challenges of our time

33. **Climate justice:** Tomorrow, 1 September, is celebrated by churches worldwide as the Day of Creation and the start of the Season of Creation that lasts until October. For some churches, 1 September is also the beginning of the church year. The issue of creation will be central to the first thematic plenary that takes place tomorrow and is central to our witness as churches. It is a theological issue. God's plan in Christ was also the reconciliation and healing of the whole creation. And let me very blunt, according to a scientific report presented last October at the meeting in Rome of the religious leaders preparing for the UN climate change conference COP 26, if we do not change our behaviour, in 50 years our planet will be uninhabitable.

34. In July this year, the German foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, described the climate crisis as "now the biggest security problem facing everyone on this earth." This statement touched my very heart. The WCC has played a prominent role in highlighting dangers to the environment, and it is the only faith-based organization that has had a permanent presence in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. This is the first WCC assembly to have received official environmental certification and in Karlsruhe we must raise up the issue of climate justice and underline the need to care for creation. We must make it "the greenest assembly ever." We have talked enough; now it is time for action.

35. **Racial justice:** Globally, racism continues in its various forms, perpetuating both racial discrimination and structures that segregate and exploit. While Black Lives Matter is a movement that emerged initially from the experiences of people of African descent in the United States, it has become a national and global movement of solidarity for different racialized groups. It raises the issue of human dignity and self-worth in the face of systems that dehumanize and pervert human dignity.

36. Racism, discrimination, and xenophobia are faced by Indigenous people, racialized peoples, Dalits, Roma people, people of African descent, and by Asians in places where they are a minority especially following the emergence of COVID-19.

37. The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the experience of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace led the WCC executive committee to agree in 2016 to a lift up a focus on racism, and, in 2021, to initiate a new programmatic response to overcoming racism, to reinforce existing work, and to strengthen the ecumenical response to the increasing manifestations we see of racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia.

38. **Human Sexuality:** The topic of human sexuality is not new in the ecumenical movement and has been repeatedly discussed since the WCC's 3rd Assembly in New Delhi in 1961. What is new today is that after lengthy debate, we have now a study and resource document on "Conversations on the Pilgrim Way – Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality," which was received by the central committee in February 2022 and offered for further study and reflection to churches who are interested in it.

39. Still, this issue continues to divide churches and to create divisions within some confessional families. While some people advance theological arguments that support one position, others, using different theological arguments, deny it and reject it. We have to be clear: the WCC does not have a position or a policy on this issue as it is the churches themselves that have to debate it and arrive at a conclusion for themselves.

40. What we all can agree, however, is the need to respect the dignity of every human being, to defend and affirm human rights for all, to condemn any violence or verbal or physical aggression, and to affirm that every human being is created in God's image.

41. For some churches, even discussing this issue remains taboo and whenever a discussion on it is proposed, they get suspicious, fearing that the WCC may support one opinion or another, and may implement it as policy that is then translated into the programmatic work of the WCC. We heard such fears expressed once again during the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly meeting in Cyprus this year and I keep hearing the same concerns and worries from other churches, in particular from the global South.

42. Because of this, some churches are keeping their distance from the WCC, and some members threaten to leave it. The report of the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly meeting reiterated the WCC position and stance on such ethical dividing issues expressed in the 2002 Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC: *"The Council cannot speak for, nor require the churches to adopt particular positions. It can, however, continue to provide opportunities for all churches to consult one another, and, wherever possible, for them to speak together. By the same token, member churches should understand that not all matters discussed within their fora can be imposed on the WCC agenda. Skill and sensitivity are needed on all sides to perceive which matters should remain within the counsels of particular churches and which can be profitably discussed together."*

43. My personal view is that even in this case we should do our best to maintain the WCC as an open and free space for dialogue on any topic with which our world is faced. But the WCC cannot, and should make it clear that will not, impose or take any stand on an ethical or faith matter that may divide the fellowship. We have to maintain the WCC as a world fellowship of churches.

7. Visiting the wounds

44. **War in Ukraine:** This is an open wound in our world today. This war is in Europe, where our assembly is taking place, and since it has worldwide implications due to the nuclear threat and the food crisis that affects people in many parts of the world, I will reflect on it more extensively.

45. From the very beginning, the WCC condemned the war, called for an immediate end to armed hostilities, for the respect of international law, the sovereignty of Ukraine, and appealed for an immediate end to indiscriminate attacks that were having an increasing impact on civilians. The WCC was in the media spotlight since the first day of the war, and as of now, more than 7000 articles have mentioned the WCC in relation to the war.

46. The WCC in its response has been consistent in:

- denouncing violence as a solution to conflict
- calling for the protection of innocent and vulnerable people
- maintaining contact and dialogue with the churches in Russia and Ukraine
- engaging churches from the neighbouring countries in round-table dialogue
- advocating for humanitarian assistance with visible expressions of accompaniment in Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, and Russia

47. At each step, my prayer has been that the WCC can be a space for dialogue, for listening to and caring for one another, and for just peace and reconciliation. We can and must advocate alternatives to geopolitical so-called solutions that would deepen divisions.

48. During this time, we received letters and messages from individuals and three churches asking us to “expel” the Russian Orthodox Church from the fellowship of the WCC.

49. In consultation with the leadership of the central committee, I responded to such requests based on the history of the council when our fellowship was confronted with similar situations. The conclusion was clear in all cases: the WCC was created as an open platform for dialogue and encounter, for discussion and challenging one another on the path to unity. Unless it was because of the theological reasons mentioned in its basis, the WCC did not exclude anybody unless they excluded themselves. This was even the case with the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa, which supported and argued for apartheid theologically. This stance led to strong debates and condemnations from other WCC member churches, but, in the end, it was the church itself that “excluded” itself from the WCC as it felt it no longer belonged. It was not the WCC that suspended or excluded the DRC.

50. During its in-person meeting in June, the central committee debated at length the issue of the exclusion of the Russian Orthodox Church from the WCC. In its strong statement on the war in Ukraine, the central committee condemned the war and any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression, and reaffirmed the nature of the WCC as “a platform and safe space for encounter and dialogue in order to address the many pressing issues for the world and for the ecumenical movement arising from this conflict, and the obligation of its members to seek unity and together serve the world, and therefore urges members of the ecumenical fellowship in Russia and Ukraine to make use of this platform.”

51. The central committee unanimously rejected the proposal of exclusion and opted to continue the dialogue. In preparation for this assembly, the central committee asked “the Acting General Secretary to do all in his power for the forthcoming 11th WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe (31 August-8 September 2022) to contribute meaningfully to the search for peace through dialogue, for justice, human dignity and human rights – including by ensuring representation from Ukraine at the Assembly – and for the reconciliation and unity to which we are called by our Lord and Saviour Christ Jesus.”

52. A few weeks ago I made a five-day visit to Ukraine. We had to go by car for 1700 kilometres because there are no flights to Ukraine. We met people in the parishes, people caring for refugees and for those who are victims of the war, as well as the church leaders. Many said that we were the first high-level religious leaders who had visited them. We heard from the church leaders and state officials words of appreciation for the courageous WCC visit of solidarity and support in conditions of danger and insecurity. I am happy to report that as an outcome of that visit, there are 11 Ukrainians representing the major churches and the National Council of Churches who are with us. In the Europe plenary they will speak for themselves and to share the realities and the challenges of the situation and hopes for the future.

53. As followers of Christ, we were entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, and the theme of the WCC’s 11th Assembly reminds us all that the love of Christ moves the world to reconciliation and unity. It would be very easy to use the language of the politicians, but we are called to use the language of faith, of our faith. It is easy to exclude, excommunicate, and demonize, but we are called as the WCC to offer a free and safe platform of encounter and dialogue, to meet and listen to one another even if and even when we

disagree. This has always been the way of the WCC. I believe in the power of dialogue in the process toward reconciliation. Imposed peace is not peace; a lasting peace has to be a just peace. War cannot be just or holy; killing is killing, which must be avoided through dialogue and negotiations.

Bleeding wounds in Middle East:

Visit to Syria and Lebanon

54. In July, I visited the churches in Lebanon and Syria, together with the general secretaries of the Middle East Council of Churches and ACT Alliance.. The visit to Syria was pending as a moral obligation. We went by car from Lebanon to Damascus and from there on to Aleppo. We were glad to visit and meet with our WCC president, His Beatitude Patriarch John X, primate of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East and with His Holiness Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II, primate of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East. We visited all the churches – Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic.

55. We saw the pain and suffering of the people, the former towns and villages that are deserted and entirely destroyed. Yet, in the ruins that are left, here and there, we met people, children in kindergarten or classrooms, modest hospitals and places that care for older people. We were moved to see how the churches are managing and taking care of such projects and that the people who are benefiting from these projects are not only Christians, but all those in need.

56. The situation of the people, however, is unbearable. We heard that some people, in despair and fearing for their survival, are selling their organs or their children to buy bread for the other members of the family.

57. The image of a boy about 10 years old still haunts me. In one meeting we had with a congregation after the Sunday service, alongside others who spoke, this boy also asked to speak. With tears in his eyes he simply asked if we could help to bring medicines for the Syrian people. He did not ask this for his family or for his church but for all Syrian people. Then, he started crying out loud. We discovered that his father was dying of cancer and was now in the terminal phase. He had pains he could not bear, and, because of sanctions, could not find any medicines in the pharmacies.

58. During our visit, the appeals from the people we met could be summarized as these two requests: “Do not forget and abandon us,” and “tell the churches present at the Assembly about our pain and suffering and ask them on our behalf to do whatever they can to help for the lifting up of the sanctions because it is not the politicians or the government who suffer from it but the normal people”.

59. When we returned to Geneva, together with the general secretary of ACT Alliance, I signed a letter addressed to President Biden asking to lift the sanctions. And we are still waiting with hope to get a response.

60. Our WCC programme on Syria will continue monitoring and addressing these painful and challenging matters.

61. I am aware that some of our initiatives or actions as this one may seem for some people unpopular, unfashionable or not politically correct. Yet, I personally think that in all situations we cannot keep silent from witnessing to the values of the Gospel which represent in fact the core of our identity. It is our moral duty to see in the face of every human being the face of Christ, and to address any suffering from the perspective of the compassionate love of Christ who manifested himself as the compassionate Lord for all who suffered, not only for some selected ones.

Visit to Israel and Palestine

62. After Syria, I visited our member churches and fellow Christians in Israel and Palestine and met with all the patriarchs, the heads of churches and local communities, as well as Christian NGOs representing the grassroots communities in Palestine. Our message and our visit of solidarity was meant to reassure our sisters and brothers in the Holy Land that they are not alone and abandoned, that the WCC continues to remain with them and to accompany them, and advocate for and defend their dignity and human rights when faced with hardships and tribulations.

63. Our restructured office in Jerusalem, which coordinates the WCC's work and presence in the Holy Land, is working well and we continue to receive many signs of hope. There are still many challenges and hardships, and we have made great efforts to respond to them and increase our advocacy work. At the same time, we have tried to maintain a just approach, to speak fairly and to denounce any violation of human rights and dignity, whether for Palestinians or for Israelis.

64. In this regard, our relationship with the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) has provided a forum for listening to the perspectives of our Jewish brothers and sisters and sharing ours with them. Though we may have different points of view on specific situations or events, we keep a sincere, friendly, and open dialogue and share the goal of a just peace for the entire region.

65. As we prepared ourselves for the assembly and prior to our visit to the Holy Land, we received news that certain well-known groups, particularly here in Germany, had started to speak against us and portray the WCC once again as an anti-Semitic organization.

66. To those who accuse WCC as being anti-Semitic, I would say boldly that already in 1948 the WCC acknowledged the history of Christian anti-Judaism and denounced antisemitism as a sin. And while we are critical of some policies of the State of Israel, again since 1948, the WCC recognizes the State of Israel and respects the right of Israel to defend itself and take care of its citizens, within the perspective of international law. We oppose, reject, condemn, and denounce all forms of antisemitism.

67. At the same time, we support equal human rights for Palestinians and oppose, reject, condemn, and denounce situations when these are not respected. Protesting against human rights violations when they occur and asking the Israeli government to protect all its people, whether they be Israeli or Palestinians, has nothing to do with antisemitism; it is a natural and normal exercise in any democratic society. We ask that the dignity and human rights of Palestinians are respected. We ask for the equal treatment of all citizens. We call firmly and consistently for the end of occupation. We have repeatedly affirmed the two state policy based on international law. We want to see Israelis and Palestinians cohabiting together on the path to peace, reconciliation, to just peace.

68. At the same time, some groups on the Palestinian side and some groups in the West have challenged us for being soft and not bold enough in denouncing and condemning human rights violations. Furthermore, based on the recent report of Amnesty International, we received letters, requests and proposals from some in our WCC constituency, in particular from South Africa and a few from the West, to change WCC policy at the assembly in Karlsruhe and denounce Israel as an apartheid state because of its treatment of Palestinians. Support for BDS (Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions) as a way of resistance and pressure on the state of Israel toward the end of occupation and respect of human rights has also been proposed and reaffirmed. All these developments are complex and sensitive with profound implications.

69. Who could answer best such hard questions and proposals if not our own member churches in the region and our fellow Christians there? Listening to them and seeking advice was one of the main reasons for my visit. The WCC accompaniment programme that is still operating there today was started at the request of our member churches. The views and opinions of our member churches are fundamental as they know best what is needed for their survival and work in their concrete situation. I have met all heads of churches, talked with and listened to people, and promised to bring their views and voices to the assembly.

70. All, with no exception, spoke about the difficult situation of the Palestinians, about cases of violations of human rights, the impunity of the aggressive acts of settlers, the demolition of houses, violations of properties and expropriations, restrictions of access to religious sites, and attempts to remove the Christian presence from the Old City of Jerusalem. All were grateful for the work of the WCC and our presence in the region, valued the work of the WCC Jerusalem Liaison Office and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), and emphasized how important this work is for the local communities.

71. Yet, when it came to the issues of apartheid and BDS they were all very cautious and nuanced. They asked the WCC to continue advocating for and defending their cause and rights but to be careful about speaking on their behalf and proposing terminology and actions that would close the doors to dialogue and threaten their very existence in the Holy Land. What do you expect we be achieved if the WCC assembly calls Israel an apartheid state, I was asked? How do you want us to support BDS which means boycotting ourselves, the local businesses of our people, our own existence here? Please, be careful with what you propose on our behalf, I was told; think of our situation here and our future. This was the message I brought back from this visit.

72. On the basis of what I heard there and was asked to convey, I urge our member churches to maintain and keep alive the commitment to advocate with the governments of their countries for the Palestinian cause and for the defence of the Palestinians' human rights and dignity, for the equal treatment of all citizens, and to intervene with the government of Israel when violations of human rights occur, asking that it respects its own laws and international conventions, and ensure they are being implemented in concrete local situations. I also encourage the churches to participate more actively in our EAPPI programme and to offer or sponsor ecumenical accompaniers, whose work and presence is so important there.

73. However, I would advise that we exercise with discernment, care, and wisdom the proposals we come up with during our deliberations in this assembly, the policies we adopt, and the directions we envisage taking so that we ensure the decisions we take here and now help the Christians and people in the Holy Land rather than endanger their very existence. I advise us to follow their voice and request.

8. Conclusion

74. This period of almost three years of work in the general secretariat of the WCC was an eye-opener for me and an experience of spiritual growth. In times of isolation and death brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, I could see concretely what the WCC means for the churches and how they relate to the WCC, asking for support, solidarity, advice, prayer, and pastoral accompaniment. I heard appreciation from the churches for the spiritual tone and language that the WCC adopted in dealing with the difficult situations during COVID-19 which brought the churches even closer to the WCC. In times of tribulation and wars, of human rights violations, of the need for a common response to natural disasters or the world food crisis, I could see once again how the WCC was perceived as the international platform where Christians could meet, discuss, express solidarity, advocate, and work together on the basis of the faith values they hold in common in responding to the difficult challenges of our times.

75. Evangelicals and Pentecostals who in former times kept their distance from the WCC, I now see coming closer, engaging with us in common actions and partnership on the basis of the kingdom values and of witness to our faith. Maybe surprisingly, most of the recent applications for membership in WCC in the last three years came from Evangelical and/or Pentecostal churches.

76. I saw a similar phenomenon among Orthodox churches who in the recent past were very critical about the WCC, with two even leaving the fellowship. The period of the COVID-19 pandemic brought us closer together. During moments of crisis, it was the WCC who was asked to intervene and to help mediate solutions toward just peace and reconciliation, to offer the safe platform, to establish roundtables for encounter and dialogues for debate and challenges, as in the case of the wars in places such as Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ethiopia, or about the desperate situation of Palestinians.

77. Furthermore, following the tradition of the past, the Orthodox took part in a pre-assembly meeting to prepare as a confessional family for the assembly. The meeting indeed took place earlier this year in Cyprus, a European country still longing for a just and peaceful solution to its tragic division, and people refer to it as to a historic meeting. For the first time Eastern and Oriental Orthodox from all jurisdictions came together (with the exception of the Orthodox Church of America and the Orthodox Church of Japan who could not attend due to the change of date of the meeting).

78. The meeting was historic but also the discussions, the debates, listening to the Russian Orthodox delegation about the war in Ukraine, and that the final report and final statement were agreed by everyone

exceeded everyone's expectations. Yet, one has to accept that if it had not been the WCC who convened and presided at such a meeting, it could never have taken place. In times of divisions and conflicts, it is the WCC that offers the safe platform where Christians can meet, engage in dialogue, and search together for ways that lead to healing and reconciliation.

79. The path to unity in faith and Eucharistic fellowship as an imperative of the ecumenical movement remains our common goal and vision, but we are still far from this goal. There are still differences and divisions which have to be overcome, and new challenges which again question the nature of Christian unity today. Yet, even the most critical voices about the WCC now agree that WCC is vitally needed especially today as a Christian fellowship, and that despite all the differences we gather together on the basis of our common affirmation that Jesus Christ is God and Saviour according to the scriptures, acknowledging that there is but One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

80. In responding to the hardships of our times, we need one another, we depend on one another, and we can advance only if we walk together, not in separation.

Therefore, I would dare to say that if the WCC did not exist, we would have to invent or reinvent it today.

81. As I conclude this report and also my mandate as Acting General Secretary at the end of this year, I would like to address my thanks to you all representing our member churches for your trust in me and for your ongoing accompaniment during this difficult times.

82. I also give glory and thanks to God for all the blessings he bestowed upon us during this period and for his constant presence and guidance. We worked hard to plan and move to the future but most of our plans did not happen and the pandemic kept us cancelling and postponing whatever we planned. But each time, and almost in the last minute, the outcomes were great and unexpected. This gave us courage to move on and recognize that the real captain of the ecumenical boat and the head of the Church is none of us but Christ Himself. We are but humbly instruments and could be successful if we follow his will.

83. From my side, with humility I could just conclude with the words of Saint Paul: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4.7). May God continue to bless and strengthen WCC in the years to come!