

For action

REPORT OF THE ACTING GENERAL SECRETARY (rev 1)

1. Gratitude

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to the leadership of the central committee – Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Archbishop Vicken Aykazian and Rev. Merlyn Hyde-Riley. We are all grateful you accepted the call to lead the central committee and the executive committee for the next 8 years. We pray for each one of you and for your collective wisdom and leadership.

I also want to thank the members of the executive committee. You may not have come to the assembly expecting to receive this call, but each one of you has unique gifts for guiding, monitoring and developing the work of the WCC. Together you will help to maintain a vibrant and engaged fellowship of member churches and ensure a healthy institution.

This is my last executive committee, so I take this opportunity to publicly express gratitude to my WCC colleagues – to the outgoing leadership, the incoming leadership, the continuing leadership and every member of the staff. It is a unique privilege to work for the WCC. I never expected to serve as acting general secretary, certainly not for nearly three years. What we achieved, we achieved together. What remains to be achieved, we will achieve together. I am grateful for the work, the friendship and the faithfulness of my colleagues.

2. Reflections from the assembly

The assembly in Karlsruhe proved anew that ecumenism is alive and vibrant. Churches have asked us to remain the platform that brings Christians together even in very difficult times. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the requests that WCC has received from member churches have been for spiritual resources, biblical resources, or worship resources. It has become clearer that the heart of our fellowship is the *ecumenical spirituality* we share, as the flame that fuels our drive for justice and sparks our work for peace. This spiritually inspired work of the WCC has a much broader reach. It aims to achieve the unity of Christians and of all creation and overcome divisions to serve all humanity in its quest for justice and peace.

The WCC 11th Assembly brought together 660 delegates, more than 4,000 other participants in person and 20,000 following online on a daily basis from all regions of the world around the theme “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” I would like to thank all of you for your vivid engagement before and during the assembly to make it a successful manifestation of our common faith. We have received numerous messages about the positive impact that the assembly had and continues to have in our churches and beyond.

In the message of the WCC 11th Assembly, “A Call to Act Together”¹, delegates committed themselves to working with all people of good will and invited all to become pilgrims together in order to better address and counter the challenges of our world. It alerted of catastrophes arising

¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/ADOPTED-MC01rev-Message-of-the-11th-Assembly.pdf>

directly from conflicts and wars as well as the irresponsible and broken relationship with creation that has led to ecological injustice and climate crisis.

Since the Busan Assembly (2013), 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. The assembly in Karlsruhe recognized the *Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity* as a natural continuation of the ecumenical paradigm that will guide the WCC's programmatic work until the next assembly.²

The assembly Unity Statement³ underlined that today, Christ's call to unity rings out even more profoundly, affirming that "the quest for a true unity is always founded in love: the love of God revealed in Christ and lived in the Holy Spirit, a love that moves us, and moves the world, to reconciliation and unity." The Statement describes the search for unity inspired by love and rooted in mutual relationships as "*ecumenism of the heart*". Seeing the world from the perspective of others, showing compassion for one another, and building trust as a vital part of our ecumenical journey are all signs of Christ-like love that move us to walk truthfully and wholeheartedly beside one another.

3. Reflections from pilgrim visits – seeking justice, reconciliation and unity

In Seoul, South Korea, I attended the 6th Pentecostal World Conference, which took place in Seoul, South Korea from 12-14 October, hosted by the Yoido Full Gospel Church, the world's largest Pentecostal congregation. The theme of the conference was "Pentecostal Revival in the Next Generation," accompanied by the prayer "Holy Spirit, come, raise up the next generation!"

I also led a WCC delegation that visited member churches in Korea to express continuing solidarity of the global ecumenical fellowship with the churches of Korea searching for peace and reunification on the Korean Peninsula. I voiced the WCC's concern over rising military tensions on the Korean Peninsula. I expressed my heartfelt appreciation for the inspiration and commitment of the churches in Korea for the ecumenical pilgrimage of justice and peace since the WCC 10th Assembly in Busan.

I led a WCC delegation in meeting Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia on 17 October in Moscow, where we discussed the current situation with the war in Russia and Ukraine and the danger of nuclear war. The visit took place at the request of the WCC central committee and was part of a series of visits that has already included the Middle East, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Israel, Ukraine, and now Russia, meant to build bridges of peace and reconciliation through encounters and dialogues and to avoid military conflicts, wars and violence.

I delivered a lecture, entitled "Coexistence is a divine mandate," during the first edition of the "Bahrain Dialogue Forum: East and West for Human Coexistence" held 3-4 November. My lecture took place during a forum session entitled "Experiences of Promoting Global Coexistence and Human Fraternity."

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/RECEIVED-PGC01rev-Report-of-the-Programme-Guidelines-Committee.pdf>

³ <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/A05rev1-Unity-Statement.pdf>

As my last travel, I am preparing to lead a WCC delegation to the Holy Land from 21-24 November. We will visit member churches, meet with non-governmental organizations and speak with national coordinators of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel.

4. Reflections on moving forward

The world, the churches and all people stand before a unique moment in history. We are experiencing global crises related to climate change, health, food security and energy. We see more and more human conflicts, including armed conflict, information wars, forced migration, occupation and domestic violence. Many of our countries are experiencing political instability that gives rise to populism, threatens democracy and challenges our belief in human rights and our commitment to human dignity.

We are not alone in facing these challenges, but we have a particular role in responding. I would like to share three lessons from my experience that I think will strengthen the WCC, not simply in facing these challenges, but in acting together to confront them.

Convening role of the WCC

The WCC is a fellowship of churches that confess a common faith in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. And together, the fellowship of churches seeks to fulfil a common calling for the glory of the Triune God. We are a fellowship united by faith for action. The WCC exists to serve the one ecumenical movement and to strengthen the churches' unity and common life in Christ as a witness to the world. This is our mission as expressed in both our constitution and in our prayers.

I have served the WCC for nearly 30 years. From different perspectives I have witnessed the unique role of the WCC – to bring churches, partners and people together – to convene tables of dialogue, exchange and action. The convening role of the WCC is among its most important functions.

The pandemic made this even clearer. Not only did it transform our methods of convening, it also reminded us that prayer is at the heart of our faith and our fellowship. The experience of fellowship was strengthened during the pandemic by our spiritual togetherness in the face of unprecedented challenges.

As you prepare to lead the fellowship forward on the pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation and unity, I want to emphasize how valuable the WCC is as a unique space for encounter, prayer and transformation.

Growing in fellowship

The WCC is a dynamic fellowship. It is significantly different than it was in 1948 and it will continue to change and grow over the next 8 years until the next assembly in 2030 under your leadership.

I am grateful to the past executive committee and central committee for the determination to fulfil their mandate. They implemented a strategic plan and developed the pilgrimage as an expression of accompaniment and companionship. They welcomed many new member churches. They pioneered the use of electronic meetings and decision-making. They completed a revision of the rules and supplement to the rules that strengthen the ethos and practice of consensus. They ensured the future of the WCC and the success of the 11th Assembly.

The central committee and the assembly both showed us that is possible to discuss difficult issues, not insisting on one position, but agreeing that different opinions and experiences can exist in the same fellowship. What is important is that we discuss difficult issues, not put them under the carpet.

What is important is that we listen to one another, pray together and act together as sisters and brothers in Christ.

The journey of the WCC is rooted in a common understanding and vision (CUV) that seeks to deepen the fellowship between the churches and broaden participation in the ecumenical movement. This is the vision that inspires our ethos of togetherness and the practice of consensus.

Your leadership on the pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation and unity, will help the WCC to continue to grow, mature and become an expression of dynamic fellowship and unity in Christ.

Strengthening the fellowship

The pre-assembly programme evaluation asked the churches “what do you think would strengthen the WCC fellowship in the future?” The responses are instructive, even more so, after the assembly.

As you engage in leading the fellowship on a pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation and unity, I want to encourage you to deepen the engagement of the churches and to be more responsive to the needs of the member churches. The evaluation offers direction for achieving this.

It is necessary to deepen the fellowship between the churches through encounters that promote dialogue, accompaniment and solidarity – helping churches to listen to and care for one another.

It is necessary to be more attentive to the churches – to listen to their concerns and understand their different contexts. Pilgrim team visits, church visits and participation in church events are effective methods of accompanying the churches.

We need to be more intentional about inclusivity and fair representation of all churches, especially smaller churches and minority churches as well as diverse voices as a way to strengthen the fellowship. This becomes particularly important as you prepare the work of the commissions and consultative bodies.

In my report to the assembly I proposed reviving the WCC regional desks. That may not be possible, but the most common suggestion for deepening the fellowship was to facilitate greater regional, sub-regional and national engagement of the churches, together with regional ecumenical organizations and national councils.

Above all, we must strengthen the theological work of the WCC as the foundation for promoting visible unity, maintaining a prophetic voice and encouraging diaconal cooperation.

As a fellowship of churches, the WCC is a strong expression of common faith and action when the churches are engaged in the life and work of the council. It has been said many times, that if the WCC did not exist, we would need to create it. While I believe that is true, I also believe that the WCC is a gift from God, an answer to Christ’s prayer and an opportunity to share our Christian witness with the world, proclaiming the love of God for all creation. The pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation and unity, is not something we do for ourselves, but for the whole of creation and the glory of the Triune God.

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

Ecumenical partners, including regional ecumenical organizations and national councils of churches, Christian world communions, and specialized ministries are all instruments of the *one ecumenical movement*, and we serve a common fellowship of churches.

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.

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.

We recognize a 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.

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.

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.

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 and our ecumenical partners for your trust in me and for your ongoing accompaniment during these difficult times.

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca
Acting WCC General Secretary