



World Council of Churches

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**Keynote address by General Secretary of WCC
Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay
On the occasion of his first solidarity visit to Sri Lanka**

Greetings and purpose of visit

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

This is my first visit to Sri Lanka, the “pearl of the Indian Ocean”, one of the most beautiful countries in South Asia. I always wanted to visit this land not only because of its beauty and people but also because of its struggles and challenges. I am pleased that within the first four months of taking office as the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches I am able to conduct this visit. I thank the National Christian Council Sri Lanka (NCCSL), through the General Secretary, for the kind invitation to me to make a visit while on my way from India where I spoke at the NCCI 29th General Assembly, which concluded yesterday. I convey my heartfelt greetings to the leaders of the NCC Sri Lanka, and all member churches on behalf of the global ecumenical movement and on behalf of the 580 million Christians, representing 352 member churches in 120 countries, that constitute the World Council of Churches, including the Church of Ceylon and the Methodist Church, Sri Lanka.

The WCC recognises with joy and gratitude the contributions of the South Asian churches and ecumenists from this region in general and particularly from Sri Lanka to the life and work of the World Council of churches (WCC). Sri Lanka has not only produced several stalwarts, prominent theologians and ecumenical leaders who have provided leadership to the WCC through its governing bodies, commissions, and programmes but also have served as staff, particularly in the field of inter-religious dialogue. If I start naming one by one, the list will be very long. But the Ecumenical world is thankful for the likes of DT Niles, Wesley Ariarajah, Shanta Premawardhana among other ecumenists for their contribution to the global ecumenical movement. The National Christian Council of Sri Lanka founded in 1945 has been continuing the good work to affirm and confess our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, and to seek together to fulfil the

common calling, to the glory of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And, for this, we give thanks and praise to God.

Global Context

As we reflect on the global context, we know that we live in a world filled with brokenness, pain, struggle and suffering where people daily face oppression, injustices, inequalities, deprivation, war, hunger, poverty, lack of access to public health, political instability, greed, violence, women and child abuse. We live in a world in which the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. We live in a world where we continue to devalue human lives, treat people as objects, care less that millions are dying, show no respect for human rights and continue to thrive on self-gain. We live in a world divided by class, caste, creed, religion, politics and economics. We live in a world where we have become accustomed to take sides, succumb to power, think about ourselves, flourish in corruption and neglect the poor masses. Our world is in crisis!

In such a context, the WCC continues to strive on a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity. We recognise that it is God's desire to heal and restore this broken world and God, equally calls us as Christians, to work toward peace and reconciliation. The God of justice and peace requires us to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. As we pray that God's kingdom may come on earth we are called to exemplify the ideals of the kingdom, serve God and the world with humility and perseverance so that God's reign may prevail.

While the church is by no means perfect we are, nevertheless, called to be instruments of God's peace, presence and hope to a struggling, sinful and suffering world. We are called to support one another in the quest for justice and peace and in a creation of a better world for all creation. We are commissioned to proclaim the saving grace and love of Jesus as we seek to preach, baptise, make disciples and teach the scriptures. The Unity Statement of the 11th Assembly of the WCC, affirming the role of the churches, called for unity in witness:

As reconciliation brings us closer to God and each other, it opens the way toward a unity founded in God's love. As Christians we are called to dwell in Christ's love and to be one (John 17). Such unity, which is a gift from God, and which arises from reconciliation and is grounded in his love, enables us to address the world's urgent problems. We will find a strength to act from a unity founded in Christ's love, for it enables us to learn the things that make for peace, to transform division into reconciliation, and to work for the healing of our living planet. Christ's love will sustain all of us in the task of embracing everyone and overcoming exclusion.

Historical relationship of Sri Lanka and WCC : Local Context

Now, turning to the local context, this beautiful country Sri Lanka has its own share of challenges, particularly with regards to the civil war. I do not wish to open old wounds, but the three decades long Conflict and the civil war in Sri Lanka has claimed thousands of lives on both sides of the ethnic divide between the Sinhala and Tamil communities. Thousands of refugees have sought asylum abroad while many thousands are internally displaced. The civilian population has been put through tremendous hardships due to summary executions, torture, illegal detentions, embargoes on essential items and the forced recruitment of children as fighters.

During the peak of the civil war, the World Council of Churches has been keenly following these challenging times and has continued to extend its solidarity to stand with the people and churches of Sri Lanka. As you would recall, the war - torn Sri Lanka received the first of a series of ecumenical "Living Letters" teams visits usually made to Christian communities facing situations of violence in different regions of the world. The "Living Letters" were effective tools of solidarity expressed by the international ecumenical community, led by the World Council of Churches that visited the places of conflict and violence and helped to explore a peaceful way forward. These visits were conceived in the context of WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) campaign.

What does the DOV mean to the churches living in a context of perpetual violence and periodic justice? This was the main question that the team reflected on as they travelled through Sri Lanka. This first of the "Living Letters" visits to the churches, in the context of the Decade to Overcome Violence, was very meaningful. The visits strengthened the work of the churches for reconciliation and peace and was a symbol of the solidarity of the churches around the world. The visits also prepared the churches for their participation in the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in 2011. I would recommend churches in Sri Lanka as well as WCC member churches elsewhere to read the report of the "Living Letters" visits to Sri Lanka, to emulate solidarity visits to conflict ridden regions.

Churches in Sri Lanka have provided cautious and critical support to the peace process, among other things through interreligious cooperative endeavours to mobilise people for peace and national reconciliation. The former general secretary of WCC at that time, Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia said, "the "living letters" team found out more about the churches' efforts and needs, and reported back to the wider ecumenical family at a time when, Sri Lanka appears to have been forgotten by the international community."

My predecessors, previous general secretaries of the WCC including Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser and Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia have also visited Sri Lanka in the past in connection with several programmes and events. Time to time WCC has also intervened by writing to the head of state, the President of the country, urging them to peacefully resolve the ethnic conflict and the civil war, as well as

for the release of some church leaders, who have been illegally detained by the security forces of the country.

While the civil war has ended in 2009, the wounds are still fresh and the people affected on both sides of the conflict must go through a process of healing. I come from South Africa, the land of my birth, where we struggled with apartheid, a policy based on racial, political, economic and social discrimination in which the majority black South Africans were marginalized, oppressed and dehumanised. After the fall of apartheid and the institution of a new democratic government in South Africa in 1994, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was appointed by the government. Although many criticize the TRC for not bringing reparation and justice to those who suffered under apartheid, it did succeed in effecting reconciliation and healing in a divided and broken country.

I am sure, that in most contexts of ethnic violence and civil wars, and even in your country, the need for reconciliation and healing is often necessary. The WCC's overarching thematic framework adopted from the 10th Assembly in Busan, offered a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace to celebrate the gifts (*via positiva*), visit the wounds (*via negativa*) and heal the wounds through *via transformativa*. I hope and pray that the affected people of Sri Lanka experience this transformation. The last assembly of WCC offered us an opportunity to continue the Pilgrimage of justice and peace towards unity and reconciliation. Justice, Unity and Reconciliation therefore lies in the heart of this peace process. Even if the Christians are a minority in Sri Lanka, they have played a significant role in mediating peace in the conflict situation and have many a time paid a heavy price for their prophetic witness. I urge you to continue to be agents and instruments of peace, reconciliation and healing in your country, and to work with fellow Christians, people of other faiths and organisations to heal and restore your land.

Present economic, political situation of Sri Lanka

Last year Sri Lanka witnessed the worst economic downturn since the South Asian country gained independence in 1948, with crippling inflation sending the cost of basic goods skyrocketing. This led to an economic and political crisis, with protesters taking to the streets in defiance of curfews and government ministers stepping down en masse. For the average Sri Lankans, the crisis turned your daily lives into an endless cycle of waiting in lines for basic goods, many of which were rationed. Shortage of food supply, medicines, gas, fuel etc. made the life of the people really difficult.

As Sri Lankans, you are fully aware of the reasons of the economic and political instability, but so do the world due to the unprecedented level to the brink of a collapse. With the excessive borrowing from foreign lenders to fund public services, the rating agencies downgraded Sri Lanka to near default levels. Natural disasters, some bad decisions relating to taxes and agriculture, the

bombing of the churches and hotels, and to top it all the Covid-19 Pandemic, almost led to a point of no return. However, the people of Sri Lanka showed their resilience and demanded accountability from the government, risking their lives and safety.

Today we see that your beautiful country is slowly but steadily bouncing back to stability. The IMF's executive board in March approved nearly \$3bn, with the endorsement expected to catalyse additional external support to the tune of \$3.75bn from the likes of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other lenders. While we recognise that the road to recovery is slow and difficult we are grateful that it presents some possibilities for hope of a better future. We hope and pray that the NCC Sri Lanka will continue to be instruments of hope in this country. The Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 8 that in the midst of the "groaning creation" we have hope, and that it is in this hope we were saved (vv.23-24). The Apostle further affirms that this hope is found in Jesus Christ whose love has conquered all things (vv.31-39). Our recent Easter celebration has reminded us afresh of the redeeming presence and hope we have in the Risen Lord.

I am aware that ecumenical movements in most parts of the world are struggling to survive. For over two decades there has been a perception that there is a crisis in the ecumenical movement, worldwide. The Indian ecumenist Prof. Dr Ninan Koshy in his book, "the history of the ecumenical movement in Asia", discusses the 'Ecumenical winter', 'lost in the fog', etc in relation to ecumenism. He reminds us that "the ecumenical movement is at the cross roads and not as effective as it was before. There seems to be a decline in the ecumenical impulse." He argues that "the ecumenical movement does not develop in a vacuum simply by its own internal dynamics. But historical, political and social and cultural factors do influence the movement and any efforts for renewal have to take into account the profound changes that are taking place in the world today." That is why it is important that we, more than ever, cooperate and join hands to work together on our common goals, inspired by the ecumenical spirit. To this end, the World Council of Churches will continue to promote and encourage ecumenical engagements to usher a just world order, based on love, unity and reconciliation.

Sri Lanka has a significant role in rekindling the ecumenical fervour drawing from its diverse confessional, denominational and multi-faith and multi-cultural context. I want to walk by your side as you live out ecumenism in your day - to - day struggles for justice and peace. I would like to conclude by drawing your attention to the statement from the WCC 11th Assembly about a vision for ecumenism:

We affirm the vision of the WCC for the visible unity of all Christians, and we invite other Christians to share this vision with us. We also invite all people of faith and goodwill to trust, with us, that a different world, a world respectful of the living earth, a world in which everyone has daily bread and life in abundance, a decolonized world, a more loving, harmonious, just, and peaceful world, is possible. In a world weighed down with so much pain, anguish, and fear, we believe that the love we have seen in Christ brings the

liberating possibilities of joy, justice for all, and peace with the earth. Moved by the Holy Spirit, compelled by a vision of unity, we journey on together, resolved to practise Christ's love, following his steps as his disciples, and carrying a torch for love in the world, trusting in the promise that Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.

Drawing from the above and in the context of Sri Lanka, I would like to encourage the NCC Sri Lanka to continue to:

1. Strengthen Christian Unity Witness
2. Work towards the healing and reconciliation of the nation
3. Remain watchful and Prophetic as you proclaim God's justice and peace
4. Build a better world for all creation mindful of climate justice, gender justice, economic justice and involvement of women, youth, disabled people and indigenous people in the work of the NCC Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

So dear friends, I have heard from our conversations with church leaders of Sri Lanka in this visit that they have played a prophetic role in standing by the people who are affected by the economic and political crisis and have done what they could do. We from the World Council of Churches deeply appreciate this action by the ecumenical institutions, churches and the NCC Sri Lanka. I also acknowledge that the WCC's visit to Sri Lanka could have been a little earlier, when the economic situation of the country was at its worst in 2022 but that was prevented by the recovering from the COVID-19 Pandemic and the transition of leadership in the WCC. But here we are today, looking forward to listening to your stories of struggle, resistance for justice and peace, successes and failures, in the spirit of ecumenism. We assure you of our solidarity as together we embark in this Pilgrimage of Justice, Unity and Reconciliation.

May God of all grace and love continue to bless you all and your beautiful nation. Amen.



Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay
General Secretary
World Council of Churches