



For action

MODERATOR'S ADDRESS

Dear sisters and brothers,

1. We are meeting as an executive committee in a time of trial. After the inspiring assembly in Karlsruhe we had our first meeting in Bossey last November with getting to know each other, thankfully looking back to Karlsruhe, beginning to envision our programmatic work in the next eight years and searching for ways to ground it in a viable financial basis. In our online meeting in December before Christmas we decided upon the budget for 2023 with painful cuts as the only way to remain on a sustainable financial path. That was hard.

2. We are now walking towards the central committee meeting in June with many transitions accomplished. Most importantly, the transitions in key positions in our Geneva staff, above all, the first months with our new general secretary, Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay. I have now worked with him intensely since the beginning of this year. We have travelled together representing WCC, to the enthronement ceremony of the new Archbishop of Cyprus, to our meeting with Pope Francis in Rome and now recently on our trip to Kiev to speak with the churches in Ukraine in preparation of a possible roundtable with the Russian Orthodox Church. I can only express my deep gratitude for Jerry's work in these first months of his term. He has done a great job. His many travels but also his internal presence and leadership in Geneva has greatly helped us making these difficult transitions.

3. The time-intensive management of transition in our internal affairs as WCC now comes together with the extremely demanding task of presence and involvement in a wounded world. This presence can never be an extra. It always must be integral part of our work as WCC if we really want to listen to Jesus' call to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

4. This is why the questions posed by the current state of the world are central to us: How do we react to the more and more visible consequences of global climate change? Where are we as WCC when droughts destroy the basis for living of those globally, who have had to struggle anyway? How can we help when flooding destroys houses and lives in Rwanda and Congo? We have expressed our deep empathy to the victims of these events. We have assured them of our prayers. And our relief agencies are trying to help as well as they can. It is, however, also clear that our spiritual and diaconal support must always be accompanied by prophetic speech and dialogue with politicians which addresses the roots of all these causes for human suffering.

5. In this respect I have personally greatly learned from German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed in 1945 by the Nazis for his resistance against Hitler. No one has influenced my own theological thinking more than this brilliant theologian and authentic Christian and – as a consequence of both – highly involved ecumenist!

6. For Bonhoeffer, Christians cannot withdraw into a private life. The life of Christians and that of the church must be public and must be interested in the lives of others. The church is only church, if it is “church for others”. And this needs public involvement:

“In flight of public controversy” – says Bonhoeffer – “this person or that reaches the sanctuary of a private virtuousness. Such people neither steal, nor murder, nor commit adultery, but do good according to their abilities. But in voluntarily renouncing public life, these people know exactly how to observe the permitted boundaries that shield them from conflict. They must close their eyes and ears to the injustice around them. Only at the cost of self-deception can they keep their private blamelessness clean from the stains of responsible action in the world.”

7. Bonhoeffer became very explicit about what this means already in 1933 when the Nazis took power and began actively persecuting Communists, Social Democrats and, above all, Jews.

8. In April 1933, a few days after the first boycott of Jewish stores, Bonhoeffer gave a lecture to the Berlin pastors. In this presentation, he called for church action on behalf of the Jews in the face of the injustice imposed on them. He describes three ways in which the church should act in relation to the state.

9. The first action is to challenge the state to act responsibly if its actions lack responsibility. The second action is to assist the victims of wrong state action. This diaconal activity is always mandatory for the church. The third action is more radical. It is not enough, says Bonhoeffer, to bandage the wounds of the victims of a dangerous driver, but it is necessary to put a spoke in the wheels and stop him.

10. How credible are our humanitarian activities if we consciously or even programmatically remain silent towards the driving forces, which cause the suffering, which we deplore? How can we not become political if political decisions are the only way to overcome the suffering?

11. This is why I was very happy about our statement on climate change in November, when we met in Bossey. Firstly, we clearly named our spiritual basis in the God of the Bible. Secondly, we expressed our solidarity with all those affected by climate change and pledged to assist them. Thirdly, we clearly addressed the governments assembled in Sharm el-Sheikh for COP 27 to take concrete political action towards an effective ecological transformation of the global economy to limit CO2 emissions.

12. How can we deal with other issues in this wounded world in a similar way? What can we do as churches to open doors towards overcoming the terrible suffering connected with the Russian invasion in Ukraine? If we as churches are not even able to build bridges to help the parties overcome a situation, which seems to be exclusively dominated by military logic, who else? If we did not even try, if we just duplicated the hostile activities of the parties fighting against each other, what would we as churches be good for? We would betray our Lord Jesus Christ of whom the Letter to the Ephesians says: “Christ is our peace” (Eph. 2:14)!

13. So many people, above all Ukrainian civilians including women and innocent children, whose houses are destroyed and whose lives are threatened by bombs and rockets, go through terrible suffering. Innumerable soldiers on both sides have been killed. People all over the world suffer from rising prices for food and other daily necessities because of this war.

14. Therefore, dear brothers and sisters: whether we can find consensus amongst our member churches on ways to overcome the daily suffering in this war is not only a question of church politics. It is a spiritual question. It is an ecclesiological question. It touches the very basis of our being as the church.

15. I am very aware of how different our situations are in each of our societies in relation to our governments. Speaking up prophetically in one country might cause not more than some poisoned comments on Facebook or some counter critique from the realm of politics. Doing the same in another country can put you to prison or even endanger your life. While we have to take these differences into account and support each other in a brotherly and sisterly way, there cannot be any doubt that we all have the task of doing everything we can to overcome violence, stop the killing and struggle for a just peace based on the dignity of every human being created in the image of God. Let us keep working together in this spirit and not shy away from mutual challenge and both loving and honest mutual exchange.

16. We might have to struggle. We might have to have patience. We might have to overcome obstacles. But I am deeply convinced that God will give us the spiritual power to be the sign of unity for the world which God has called us to be.

17. Recently, I experienced how something new and bright can arise from the darkest darkness. I was invited to give a speech at the commemoration of the 78th anniversary of the liberation of the Flossenbürg concentration camp, which is located in my Bavarian church. About 500 people had come from all kinds of countries to commemorate the victims of the concentration camp. And there were seven survivors of the concentration camp. I did not feel any hatred from them. I felt a very touching community of people who are determined not to let evil grow again from the bad things that happened in that place, but to let it become a breeding ground for a world in which all people can live in dignity and in which people treat each other with respect and love spreads.

18. We also commemorated a man who had been executed only a few meters from the place where we had gathered, many years ago, on April 9, 1945, a few weeks before the liberation of the concentration camp. The words of this man on the good that can come from evil have become famous. This man was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In a time of trial, he wrote down these words:

“I believe that God can and will bring good out of everything, even out of the most evil. For this, he needs people who let all things serve them for the best... I believe that God wants to give us as much resilience as we need in every adversity. But he does not give it in advance, so that we do not rely on ourselves, but on him alone. In such faith, all fear of the future should be overcome.”

19. Dear sisters and brothers, let us engage in the reflections and discussions of this week in this spirit of faith, hope and love. Let us be conscious that our voice is needed. Let us open ourselves up to Christ, whose love moves us reconciliation and unity.