



For action

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SECRETARY

Introduction

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
³ though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.
⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
⁵ God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
⁶ Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
⁷ The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.
⁸ Come and see what the LORD has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
⁹ He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
¹⁰ He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."
¹¹ The LORD Almighty is with us
the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Psalm 46)

1. The above Psalm draws our attention to real turbulence described in very graphic words such as "the earth be removed, mountains be carried into the midst of the sea, waters roar and mountains quake with its surging." All of these speak of unsettling stability and forceful disturbance. Of course, this is enough to warrant fear and anxiety about both the present and the future.

2. As we consider the state of the world right now, it is evident that we are facing global crises of major proportions. There is an ever-increasing measure of restlessness, violence, conflicts and wars, and climate challenges that seem to pervade our world. The wars in Ukraine, Palestine, and Israel have dominated our attention in recent times, and of course, conflicts in Africa, Asia, and other parts of the Middle East; those places we never really talk about have been with us for a long time. There is a struggle for peace and justice in the world.

3. It is very easy to get discouraged and to lose hope in the midst of all of these turbulent experiences and disruptions. However, Psalm 46 is also a text of great comfort and assurance. It reminds us that in the midst of a very violent and troubled world we can still have hope and peace. Why? Because God is our refuge and strength, our help in trouble.

4. Psalm 46 is an incredible source of strength and wisdom. It reminds us that in the midst of tumult and turmoil we should “be still and know that I am God (v. 10).” It is a powerful reminder that God provides peace and protection. God’s presence and help is greater than any crisis in our lives and world. In spite of all the turbulence and conflicts in the world, the “Lord is exalted among the nations.” Therefore, we must not fear but abound in hope and action to transform the world so that it may be what God wills and wants. Let us continue to work with God to make the world a better place for all people and creation.

5. The theme of the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe last year rings timely and strongly again. As Christians, we must know that “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” The programmatic theme adopted at that assembly also resonates well in the current context of turbulence, conflict, war, hunger, food insecurity, ethnic and gender violence, racial conflicts, economic injustices, climate crisis, and the list goes on. The programme theme speaks of a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity. In such a context, the WCC is called to pastorally and prophetically hold out hope and light in Jesus Christ to the world around us riddled with brokenness, suffering, sin, and pain. How can we be God’s healing and restoring presence?

6. In order to make a difference in the world we need to return to the vision and mission of the WCC that speaks of Christian unity as we proclaim Christ to the world. More than ever, Christians need to be together in unity and work and witness together so that the world may believe in Jesus (John 17:21). Yet, sadly, churches continue to divide and offer a contradictory message to the world as we plead for justice, reconciliation, and unity in that we ourselves tend not to practice what we preach. Ethical issues, biblical interpretations, personalities, quest for power and authority, political affiliations, and religious nationalisms continue to divide churches. It is obvious that in the fellowship our unity in Christ is affected by our current circumstances, allegiances, and contexts. We need to be reminded by the Apostle Paul that we “wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph.6:12).” The apostle reminds us that we must stand with God rather than with those other influences, if we are to pray and work for visible Christian unity.

7. Unity is not uniformity. God has blessed us with a rich tapestry of diversity and identities. However, these were never intended to divide us, make us more superior or distinct from others; it is neither a tool for the oppression of the other nor a glorification of self. Created in the image of God, we are called to live together in unity and strength and to glorify and praise God together in Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit helps us to remain faithful in unity and witness to the world. Our identity and oneness are established in Jesus who makes us one and breaks down all barriers and hostilities and gives us peace (Eph. 2: 11-22). For Christ is our peace!

From Geneva to Abuja

8. It is barely five months since the central committee met in Geneva in June 2023 and yet so much has happened since then. My monthly accountability reports have given detailed information of the WCC activities during this time; I trust that you would refer to those if you have not already read them. Nevertheless, in this report I will highlight some of the major events and activities as we

proceed from the central committee meeting in Geneva to the executive committee meeting in Abuja, Nigeria.

9. **Implementation Plan 2023-2030.** The central committee approved the Strategic Plan (SP) presented in its meeting in June this year. The SP sets out clearly the strategic directions and goals for the next eight years. The general secretary was requested to work on an Implementation Plan (IP) to enact the SP. I am pleased to report that I set out and guided a process to draw up the IP, which is presented to this executive committee to be received.

10. The process of drawing up the IP included all staff and conversations with ecumenical partners and others. The staff were requested to align their work with the vision, mission, and values of the WCC. Further, staff were requested to focus, consolidate, and regroup their existing programmes into the strategic goals of the SP. The eventual IP produced came after a lot of staff collaboration and conversations, within the respective departments but also collectively in the Staff Planning Days in early October.

11. The IP provides details in respective columns (see document) to indicate the goals, actions, responsible functions, tools, resources, and indicators related to the WCC strategic directions. The IP is not intended to be a prescriptive blueprint but a guideline for the WCC work in the next eight-year cycle leading to the assembly in 2030. We live in very volatile times therefore plans must be created with a fair level of flexibility and resilience rather than rigidity to navigate unforeseen experiences, for example, like an unexpected COVID-19 pandemic or financial constraints, etc. The IP addresses the what, why, how, who, and when questions related to an implementation plan. The key foci in the IP are the goals, actions, and indicators. The in-between columns is where the flexibility is possible.

12. It must be noted that, though, it may not be fully spelt out in the IP, the methodologies by which we will continue to implement the plan would include collaborative and engaged work with member churches, ecumenical partners, regional ecumenical organisations, NGOs, other religious groups and stakeholders. Such collaboration is also integral to our internal work of the various departments within the WCC to encourage interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary engagements.

13. I know that when one sifts through the rather bulky IP, the immediate response would be that the WCC is doing too much. We need to note that most of the activities are already in progress; staff had to seriously restructure and consolidate their work and in some cases reduce or drop certain activities. We have tried to meticulously align the IP with the SP and this helped us to determine what should stay and what should go. Lest we think that the IP promises too much, I would suggest that we should focus primarily on the goals, actions, and indicators.

14. The IP does not provide details of the financial resources and budgets required to implement the plan. The budget is provided in a separate document, refer to the IP's appendices.

15. **Concept paper on the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity (PJRU).** Another key task given to the general secretary at the June central committee was to prepare a concept on the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity. In initiating work on this document we realised that much has already been done in the past. Seeing that the new pilgrimage is a continuation of the old one, albeit it with some new emphasises, it is not necessary to start from scratch. Thus, we proposed not to reinvent the wheel but to build on the work of the previous document. What we offer to this executive committee takes into consideration the lessons learnt from the previous pilgrimage and

the new directions the PJRU will need to take during the next eight years. At this executive committee, we will take time to discuss the PJRU and a “theology of companionship” in two plenaries. The intention is to gather information and use it to engage the whole fellowship to contribute, understand and own the concept and theology of companionship and pilgrimage. For this reason, it should not be a rushed process but one that is referred to the Pilgrimage Reference Group to develop further and present to the next executive committee for adoption and approval.

16. Ukraine and Russia Roundtable. With the mandates from the WCC assembly in 2022 and the recent central committee, we pursued in earnest efforts to bring the Orthodox churches in Ukraine and Russia to dialogue on the ways to unity and peace. We engaged this in the hope that we may be able to persuade them to help contribute to the ending of the war by mobilising for peace. Soon after the central committee, we wrote to the Ukraine Orthodox Church (UOC), the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) inviting them to a proposed roundtable in October with the objectives of working toward unity and peace.

17. The UOC responded to our invitation indicating that while they were supportive of the initiative they would find it difficult to participate while the OCU was still exercising “aggression” on their congregations and they feared that some of their participants would not be able to return to the Ukraine if they travelled out of the country. We considered the reasons given by the UOC would prevent them from participating and we then proposed to meet in Ukraine instead. Although we received verbal responses to our second letter, we received no formal commitment to the process. However, the turn of events in recent times has opened new doors for further conversations and possibilities with the UOC.

18. The OCU unfortunately never responded to both our letters in any formal way though we had heard from very reliable sources that they indicated a positive willingness to participate in the roundtable process. The way of a no response is a rather unfortunate choice. Had they responded formally, at least we would have been able to identify and navigate our way through these challenges.

19. The ROC responded very positively to the invitation and committed to participate at the roundtable. However, we are mindful that political challenges and other complexities rendered it impractical for the UOC and OCU to participate at this time. Thus, we consequently postponed the roundtable for now with the hope that we may still proceed with this in the near future.

20. The WCC remains committed to the task of Christian unity and peace in the world. We will certainly keep trying our best to foster dialogue and cooperation in the quest for unity and peace. While the war in Ukraine and Russia continues, we cannot remain idle and unaffected; we are all part of the human chain. The WCC will continue to strive for dialogues on peace in Ukraine and Russia, and we pray that the churches there will swim against the tide of external influences and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us to the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, our Lord, and to peace and reconciliation with one another and all creation.

21. Nagorno-Karabakh. The central committee requested the general secretary to lead an ecumenical delegation to Nagorno-Karabakh in light of the challenges there and the plight of over 120,000 people denied humanitarian aid since the closing of the Lachin Corridor by Azerbaijan. The delegation, consisting of the general secretary, H.E. Archbishop Vicken Aykazian (WCC vice-moderator), Rev. Rita Famos (central committee member and president of the Protestant Church in Switzerland), and WCC staff: Peter Prove, Carla Khijoyan, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi.

22. The WCC delegation was graciously received and hosted by H.H. Karekin II, Patriarch and Catholicos of all Armenians, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. We met with other representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church, government officials of Armenia, humanitarian organisations and other key people to discuss the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh that painted a very sad picture of the struggles and sufferings of the people in that context.

23. It so happened that about an hour or two before we neared the Lachin Corridor, Artsakh was attacked by Azerbaijan. Consequently, we were prevented from going any further but we were able to do a live coverage from there to the world pointing out the need for humanitarian aid to the people in Artsakh and of the situation that we were witnessing at that time. This video recording was used by leading news channels across the globe which strengthened the WCC presence and witness to the world of our ministry in places of conflict and suffering.

24. As you know, about 100,632 people have been forcibly displaced and have found refuge in different regions of Armenia. We are glad that Armenia graciously received these displaced people and are doing their best to assist and support them. However, we do realise that much more assistance is required to help the situation. We continue to offer our prayers and support for the people affected in this country.

25. We realise that though there is calm in the context now, the future security and sovereignty of Armenia – the oldest Christian nation – and of ancient Christian heritage of this land is still at risk. We need to watch this space with care and concern.

26. **Christian Conference of Asia Assembly.** It was a joy and pleasure to present the keynote address at the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) Assembly in September 2023 on the theme: “God, renew us in Your Spirit, and restore Your Creation.” I was also thankful for the opportunities to participate in various other significant activities at the assembly. CCA general secretary, Dr Mathews George Chunakara, arranged a very comprehensive and meaningful programme for my visit, including opportunities to meet with church leaders at various different times. I found these visits incredibly useful to build stronger relationships, deepen the fellowship, and strengthen our collaboration. I left Kerala with a deep sense of gratitude and knowledge that my visit to the CCA Assembly fostered a new appreciation of and commitment to the WCC from our 27 member churches there. May God continue to bless their witness and ministry in the context of their ongoing challenges faced as minority Christians in that part of the world.

27. **United Bible Society Assembly.** In October, I had the privilege and joy to be one of the keynote speakers at the assembly of the United Bible Society in Amsterdam, Netherlands. I was pleased to see some members of the central committee serve as chairs or on the Board of Bible Societies in their home countries. I was greatly appreciative of the vast coverage UBS gave to the WCC during their assembly and it was surprising that so many churches that are not members of the WCC inquired about possible membership with the fellowship. It is heartening to see the increasing interest of non-member churches to learn more about the WCC. We welcome these inquiries and possibilities with joy and thanksgiving.

28. **Secondments.** One of the ways in which we are seeking to increase involvement of member churches in the life and work of the fellowship is through secondments. We have refined and crystallised our secondment expectations, without any policy changes, to show the mutual benefits to the sending organisation, the WCC, and the person seconded.

29. As we continue to share the new Strategic Plan and its methods of decentralisation and interdisciplinary foci, we find that more member churches and ecumenical partners are keen to second staff to us in specified areas of interest and work. Currently, we have more than 13 pending possibilities for secondments. These secondments are based on needs of the WCC and the suitability of the people sent to WCC for stipulated tasks.

30. We note with joy the goodwill and increased participation of member churches in the work of the fellowship through these secondments and hope that through this we may have more impact and deeper relationships not only among the member churches concerned but also in the regions from which they come.

Matters referred from the central committee to the general secretary

31. At the central committee, a number of recommendations were referred to the general secretary to act on. In this section, I will report on most of them that required input; others were mainly transactional matters.

32. **Commission on Climate Justice and Sustainable Development.** Member churches were informed about the creation of a new Commission on Climate Justice and Sustainable Development, and requested to send their nominations. This was done, and a list of nominations taking into consideration balances of representation is presented to the executive committee for consideration and approval.

33. **Pentecostal World Fellowship.** The general secretary was asked to consult with the Pentecostal World Fellowship on the formation of the Pentecostal members in the Joint Consultative Group (JCG). This was in relation to increasing the number of members by an additional person and establishing whether Pentecostal member churches of the WCC could serve on the JCG, especially from Latin America and Africa. I am pleased to report that we met with Rev. Dr Billy Wilson (president of the PWF) and Rev. David Wells virtually to discuss these matters. The PWF agreed to increase the membership numbers by one more and they had no reservations about Pentecostals from the WCC serving on the JCG. They felt it was the decision of the WCC to choose its participants in this group. We will bear this in mind for future appointments to the JCG. We also appreciate the cordial spirit of the PWF in our joint work and witness to the world.

Report on no-show analysis at WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany

34. The following proposal was passed at the central committee: “asks the general secretary that the report analysing the reasons for the no-show and cancellation costs for hotels of CHF 0.4 million be completed and presented to the executive committee in November 2023.” In a summary response to this request, the following can be noted.

35. The WCC was obliged to work through KTG, a state-owned company, to secure hotel contracts. In spite of repeated efforts to negotiate a two-night cancellation clause, as was the case for the WCC 10th Assembly in Busan with a commercial agent, the WCC had to accept a far less advantageous agreement. The direct contracts between WCC and the hotels were signed from either 25-28 August to 8-9 September. The WCC was obliged to book rooms in this range of dates and to pay the full booking if participants arrived late/left early or did not arrive.

36. In total 2,740 nights were booked, but not used by 221 participants. Not all of these were “no shows.” Some participants arrived later than expected or left early, resulting in nights booked, but not used.

37. 65 participants arrived later or left earlier than originally booked. Hotels 1 to 10 (1,261 nights, or 46% of nights) were hotels under contract with WCC. These are not “no shows,” but nights not used.

38. 156 participants were actual no shows, i.e. they registered, rooms were booked and they did not come to Karlsruhe. This accounts for the remaining nights that were booked and not used (1,479 nights, or 54%). The no-show rate is 3% of the total assembly participants (4,521), which is considered to be very low for an event of this magnitude.

39. The no-shows include 122 subsidized participants and 34 self-payers at an average of 8 nights per participants. More than half (54%) of the no shows were delegates while others were spread amongst across other categories, such as advisors to delegations (9.5%), stewards (7%), or assembly participants (14%).

40. The main reasons for no-shows were: visa issues, not allowed to travel because of COVID, and personal matters.

41. It should be noted that 14.5% of the no show nights were self-payers and were re-invoiced before the end of December 2022.

42. Certainly, lessons were learnt from this experience. We will take careful measures to ensure that this will not occur again. Although, these experiences are somewhat expected in large events such as an assembly, we must at all times ensure that we will never again incur no-show costs to the level of such propositions (2.6%). We will be careful to put certain measures in place addressing the issue of no-shows and attendance.

43. **Membership matters.** The central committee accepted the applications of four new churches: the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, the Apostolic Pentecostal Church International, and the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany. The central committee requested the general secretary “to consult with the member churches during the interim period, so that the central committee can assess whether a consensus of member churches has developed in favour of the applications according to rule 1.5.” The churches concerned have been duly informed about the acceptance of their applications and the process of consultation is in progress and will be reported to the next central committee.

44. I am pleased that the central committee in June this year passed the following resolution: “recommends that exceptions for membership requirement based on size should be applied generously per rule 3.b.iii. by the central committee.” The membership rule states that churches applying for membership should have a membership of more than 50,000 but churches with a membership of over 10,000 can be considered under special circumstances. In my travels and addresses to national council of churches assemblies and conferences, many church leaders who are currently not part of the WCC approach me to discuss possibilities of membership. Some of them do not have more than 10,000 members overall and it is not possible to have these numbers in their geographical locations because of the limited size of the population. I am thus very pleased that this recommendation was approved at the last central committee and it may be that careful generosity

may need to be exercised in the case of some membership applications. While adhering to and respecting the current procedures for membership, in light of the increasing interests of churches wanting to join the WCC, it may be opportune at a later time to consider afresh whether the current rules for membership are appropriate for our changing times.

45. Human sexuality. As you know, the issue of human sexuality generated a lot of discussion at the last central committee. The central committee eventually approved the following proposal by consensus: *“The central committee of the World Council of Churches requests the general secretary to provide safe spaces for ecumenical learning and conversations on contested issues, especially on human sexuality with member churches and ecumenical partners who are open to dialogue on this matter, balancing the call of the assembly and the recommendations of the PCCC and to report on them to the governing bodies.”*

46. Member churches and ecumenical partners have been informed of this decision and are at liberty to dialogue on the subject. The general secretary is committed to providing safe spaces for dialogue and ecumenical conversations on this topic as established within the parameters agreed upon by the central committee. This is and probably will be an ongoing process within the fellowship.

47. Public Issues. A number of matters from Public Issues were referred to the general secretary at the central committee. They are:

- Colombia peace process (for letter to be sent to Colombian President)
- Haiti
- Situation in Manipur and other areas in northeast India
- Violence and human rights in Mexico
- Injustice of Cuba’s current designation as a country sponsor of terrorism
- Migrant/human trafficking issues
- Statement against death penalty based on sexual orientation
- Indigenous genocide in Brazil
- Injustices to Dalit Christians in India
- Syria
- Border situation between Sudan and Egypt

48. Conversations, work, and follow up have taken place on most of these, including the writing of letters as requested. I have worked with the CCIA director, Peter Prove, on these issues. Of course, not all areas have received equal attention during this limited period of five months. We will continue to follow up on these matters.

49. We are pleased to report that the WCC is intensifying its accompaniment and support for the search for sustainable peace in Colombia. WCC has been recognized as a Permanent Observer/Accompanier in the recently-established dialogue roundtable between the Colombian Government and the EMC FARC-EP (a faction of the FARC that remained outside of the 2016 Peace Accords), serving alongside the Roman Catholic Church, the United Nations Mission in Colombia, and the Organization of American States; and the Guarantor States in that context. Dr Humberto Shikiya and Rev. Dr Fernando Enns are representing WCC in the peace processes in Colombia, working with our member church, the Presbyterian Church of Colombia, and our ecumenical partner DiPAZ in that context. I am planning to visit Colombia in December, to further affirm our commitment to contributing to “total peace” in Colombia.

Finance and Green Village Project

50. We are pleased to report that our financial forecast for this year indicates a balanced outcome across all our activities. Total programme income is forecast to reach CHF 14.6 million, compared to the budget of just under CHF 14 million approved in December last year.

51. We express gratitude to all member churches and partners who contributed generously this year, including those who responded to our appeal. For 2023, we anticipated a very low exchange rate from Euro to Swiss franc. The rate improved, and during the year, about half of the income increase is drawn from that, while we also have had some new funding opportunities. For 2023, not only did executive committee grant CHF 700,000 from the general reserves for the continuity of our work, but also the 2023 budget included a CHF 400,000 programme deficit – which would have been charged to the general reserves in addition, if realised. Our forecast for programme work now shows that we expect to complete the year 2023 with programme work managed from available income and programme funds. We are very grateful for this change of situation.

52. Planning for 2024 presents particular challenges financially. While we are pleased to report that the draft budget indicates total programme income at CHF 14.3 million, and we are grateful for that, it is not enough for the extent of work we envisage.

53. A new financial profile emerges for 2024, and with increased risks. It will be a year of moving from the Ecumenical Centre to the Kyoto building. We lose our rental income as owner. We take up an operating cost profile without related income, as tenants in the Kyoto building. Meanwhile, as you know, we take on an additional risk in sub-letting space within the Kyoto building. A number of assumptions are made in addressing these budget risks, also with regard to the future profile of the general reserves.

54. In order to move forward from Kyoto, WCC needs to build its fund for investment by sale of the Stockholm land plot. But it also needs to move ahead with the building permit request for the Lima building. To be sure to have the permit within the required timeframe, it should be filed with the authorities before the year end. The steering committee has been following the plans over the last months. However, when the committee last met in October, financial plans were not complete. A recommendation on the building permit request could not be brought to this meeting without that information. The steering committee will convene again in early December to consider developments, and its recommendation to you, executive committee. To prepare ourselves for that next step, as the executive committee, we will also hear a presentation from Implenia about Lima during this meeting. Our hope and recommendation is that the executive committee will decide at this meeting to convene online in December to decide on the Lima building permit.

55. As general secretary, I carry responsibility for the staff and the good functioning of the organisation. However, to be effective, an organisation has to have a process of delegation of authority in place, which is already the case. However, it is important that delegations made are clear, and also that limitations are well understood. In that way, each team member works with confidence. While only significant matters should be addressed by the general secretary and the staff leadership group, the principle of joint signature for contracts and other legally binding documents remains fundamental; as does dual control over financial transactions. In addressing the policy over delegated signing authorities, I have also taken into account the reality that certain orders for supplies have to be undertaken individually. Travel tickets, services purchased by credit card, are such examples. Our policy sets limits, and clarifies the level for action, under the

responsibility of each staff leadership member. The policy also introduces the requirement that the list of bank signatories, including those with electronic access to release payments within our documented control processes, be approved by the moderator or a vice-moderator, as well as the general secretary. We will conduct this step during this executive meeting. A summary of the policy is included in this meeting's documentation (FIN 10), setting out the principles. The policy will be issued to all staff before the end of this year.

56. In my report to the central committee in June, I raised the matter of establishing a Pastoral Solidarity Fund. The purpose of the fund would be to offer gifts from the World Council of Churches when conducting visits. When visiting and witnessing together, and especially in places where people are suffering, our aim is to be able to offer a symbolic WCC cross, certainly and always, but also a more practical gift, with values which might range from CHF 500 to CHF 2,000. Our current policies limit gifts to a nominal value of CHF 100, with the approval of a member of the staff leadership group. I know that in certain situations, we have exceeded that level. In some circumstances, it is painful to be unable to offer a more substantial gift, while we cannot either attempt to bring humanitarian aid, as organised through sister organisations and member churches. Meanwhile, as a leader, one is cautious also concerning use of funds given to the World Council of Churches in our work for unity. It is not my wish to divert funds intended for our work to gifts, nor to preside alone over funds intended for gifts or to assume the service of humanitarian organisations, such as ACT Alliance. The latter is not intended at all. All that this fund purposes to do is offer somewhat decent symbolic gifts when visiting contexts in need of solidarity and pastoral care within the fellowship. A proposal for a fund-raising target, and suitable rules and regulations for a Pastoral Solidarity Fund, are therefore shared in a section of the document FIN 04 for consideration at this meeting.

Communications: pursuing digital justice

57. In line with the "New Communications Paper for the 21st Century," and the approved WCC Communication Strategy, WCC communications has engaged with WCC programmes and ecumenical partners in enhancing opportunities and raising awareness of social justice issues related to society's increasing digital dependence. WCC communications provided input to the development of the statement by the central committee in June 2023 on the "Unregulated Development of Artificial Intelligence."

58. WCC collaborated with the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) in publishing: Digital Justice: A Study and Action Guide, now available in English, Spanish and French. The English guide was printed for the WCC central committee meeting along with a fun "Digital Revolution Game" to test our knowledge of online justice issues.

59. Also, the following are in process:

- an online course on digital justice, led by WACC with WCC and EMW support. The course has three sessions intended for digital media literacy and six sessions deepening the issues and focusing on advocacy;
- a two-part webinar series on Religion and Disinformation, and how churches can help to address deliberate online misinformation, led by Public Witness and Communications, with the support of the German Foreign Ministry;
- assisting young ecumenical leaders to address gender cyber violence, in a December workshop led by Just Community of Women and Men and WACC with the support of the German Foreign Ministry.

WCC programme work

60. From the information provided below, you will see the significant amount of work undertaken by the programme staff during the past five months. We have already started to implement the Strategic Plan (2023-2030) adopted by the central committee in June this year. While much of the work from the previous eight years may continue, it is important to reiterate that we have regrouped, focused, and aligned programme goals and activities with the new Strategic Plan to allow for greater effectiveness, efficiency, and resource management and cost savings. In this section, I will refer to the work covered by the programmes in Public Witness and Diakonia; and Unity, Mission, and Ecumenical Formation.

Public Witness and Diakonia (PWD)

61. This section addresses the four main goals of PWD and the transversals that are part of its work.

62. **The Living Planet.** To deepen theological reflection and foster the spirituality of ecological and economic *metanoia*, the WCC hosted the SOFTE Eco-theology Conference from 5-7 July in Geneva. This is a contribution to the global ecumenical celebration of Season of Creation from 1 September to 4 October with the theme, "Let justice and peace flow." The secretariat also organised the Global Week of Prayer and Action on Food from 16 to 20 October, and offered a response to Pope Francis' *Laudato Deum*.

63. Churches were convened to reflect on the question of labour during the New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) Consultation on Labour held from 21 to 23 August in Kuala Lumpur. The consultation produced a theological statement and advocacy plan for decent work and just wages. In a seminar on "Spirituality, Climate Adaptation, and Resilience Building" that took place from 25 to 27 October in Colombo, theologians and practitioners as well as youth and Indigenous persons exchanged reflections on and practical examples of the critical role of spirituality in nurturing resilience to climate change.

64. To strengthen the capacity of churches to respond to urgent ecological and economic challenges, the 6th Ecumenical School on Governance, Economics, and Management for an Economy of Life was organised in Kuala Lumpur from 21 August to 1 September. It equipped 24 church leaders and youth with the methodologies and tools to promote eco-just economic systems. The North American and European edition of the EcoSchool on Water, Food and Climate Justice is currently being organised from 11 to 18 November in Crete, providing young people with the tools to analyse the water-food-climate nexus and serve as eco-ambassadors in their contexts.

65. The WCC continues to work towards a new global environmental and economic policies through NIFEA project. A letter was sent to the Group of Twenty calling for global tax justice as expressed in the Zacchaeus Tax campaign and economic transformation in light of the polycrisis of declining economic wellbeing, democratic degeneration, and climate change. Another letter was addressed to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, specifically expressing the support for a UN Tax Convention to raise the resources to respond to these crises. At the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and Climate Week in New York, side-events and parallel activities explored responses to the human rights implications of climate-induced displacement, as well as mobilised churches and faith communities to advocate for the phase-out of fossil fuels.

66. The WCC Ecumenical Water Network continued to be instrumental in championing of water justice by establishing more "blue communities." The Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná in Brazil was, in this light, accredited as a "Blue University" in a ceremony during the Peoples' Water

Forum in Colombia on 26 September.

67. Workshops building the capacity of churches and ecumenical partners on ecumenical *diakonia* and sustainable development were held in Lomé, Togo, in collaboration with AACC for 35 participants from 11 countries in June; and in Kottayam, India, in collaboration with CCA in September for 40 participants from 12 countries.

68. WCC, with ecumenical organisations and partners, organised a “Weekend of Prayer & Action Against Hunger” on 14 to 16 October, coinciding with World Food Day on 16 October. Resources for prayer and action were developed and distributed in advance, and partners and member churches organised various events using the material globally.

69. **Human Rights and Access to Justice.** The planned dialogue and peace in Ukraine has been postponed and new ways for engagement are being explored.

70. WCC convened Ethiopian church leaders (from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Ethiopian Catholic Church) in late November to promote closer ecumenical cooperation and coordination for humanitarian relief and peacebuilding, including through the establishment of a national council of churches in Ethiopia.

71. West Papua – regular monthly meetings with West Papua Council of Churches have taken place to update on the situation in the territory; ongoing monitoring and reporting on human rights issues in West Papua, and related submissions to UN human rights mechanisms (through consultancy agreement with Human Rights Monitor); encouraging and accompanying efforts for dialogue between Papuan representatives and the Indonesian government.

72. Discussions on closer collaboration have been organized with key expert partners in the field of peacebuilding (esp. Humanitarian Dialogue Centre, and Sant’Egidio Community).

73. Efforts have been made through Churches’ Commitments to Children programme to leverage WCC constituency (member churches and ecumenical partners) for accelerated action and accountability on climate change (e.g. ‘climate-responsible finance’ initiative).

74. Ongoing advocacy and awareness-raising related to the nuclear threat and the doctrine of nuclear deterrence continues, and for nuclear disarmament through the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, in a context of heightened tensions between nuclear-weapon states.

75. **Peace building in the Middle East.** The World Council of Churches has undertaken numerous initiatives to strengthen advocacy efforts and highlight the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East region. One significant effort was the collaborative organization of the “Bethlehem Reborn” exhibition in partnership with the Palestinian Committee for Church Affairs, supported by the Palestinian embassies in Geneva and Rome. The highlight of this event was the visit of His Holiness Patriarch Theophilos to the Ecumenical Centre, where he delivered a notable address during the inauguration.

76. The World Week of Peace for Palestine and Israel, themed “No Place to Lay My Head,” was observed in the third week of September. The Jerusalem Advisory Group produced a resource document for this occasion, and various activities such as feature stories, a global prayer event, and advocacy initiatives took place throughout the week.

77. The situation in the Holy Land took a turn when the war erupted on 7 October, impacting the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). Twenty-four ecumenical accompaniers (EAs) were evacuated, and the programme had to shift into crisis mode. Efforts were redirected to ensure the safety of staff while still providing vital accompaniment to local communities in the midst of these challenging circumstances. The Jerusalem Liaison Office (JLO) coordinator was given the responsibilities of the EAPPI coordination until a new candidate is appointed. In the meantime, the coordinator managed the evacuation of all EAs out of Palestine and Israel. The EAs will continue their programme virtually.

78. The JLO continued to advocate heads of churches' positions on attacks against Christians by Israeli settlers and extremists. We conducted over than ten media interviews, seven meetings with visiting delegations, and more than 12 communications releases during this period since the central committee.

79. **Health and Healing.** Since the last executive committee, the Health and Healing Programme has continued to promote the "Health-Promoting Churches" model as an approach or methodology of mobilising and equipping the churches to strengthen their health ministries, especially at the grassroots level.

80. The programme staff facilitated the translation of the Health-Promoting Churches resources into Indonesian Bakasa by Christian Foundation for Public Health (YAKKUM).

81. Process is underway for the South Sudan Council of Churches to establish a Christian health association to strengthen the health ministry of the churches, especially given their fragile situation.

82. We have continued to strengthen the networking of Christian health ministries, both hospital-based and congregation-based, thus widening the Global Ecumenical Health Network which shall be formalised in due course.

83. We also strengthen partnership with professional health bodies. In particular, we commemorated World Mental Health Day with panel discussions involving WHO, World Federation for Mental Health, and World Psychiatric Association, and showcased experiences from running a mental health awareness project in over 500 South African congregations of Uniting Reformed Church and Dutch Reformed Church. It is evident that issues of mental health and trauma healing should tangibly be on the priority of the ecumenical fellowship, and that there are already good practices among our member churches that should offer starting points to others.

84. In regards to HIV work, in 2023, WCC organized and contributed to the Uganda ['Framework for Dialogue' in Uganda brings actions toward eliminating HIV stigma – Episcopal News Service](https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2023/08/08/framework-for-dialogue-in-uganda-brings-actions-toward-eliminating-hiv-stigma/) <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2023/08/08/framework-for-dialogue-in-uganda-brings-actions-toward-eliminating-hiv-stigma/>

85. The WCC HIV initiative in Nigeria built the capacities of interfaith communities on the intersections of gender and HIV; HIV treatment adherence versus exclusive claims of faith healing; and the Global AIDS Strategy.

86. In Nigeria and Uganda, a framework for dialogue between faith leaders and communities to end HIV stigma and an analysis of the impact of HIV stigma on the service uptake among women,

children, and adolescents was put in place.

87. At a global level, WCC enabled access for communities and faith leaders to global and regional HIV forums, and coordinated interfaith collaboration and advocacy, uplifting the voices of vulnerable communities, breaking the silence, and speaking out against gender-based violence and its connections to HIV.

88. Two new HIV tools for the faith communities have been developed [WCC, UNAIDS to equip faith communities to end HIV | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/publications/wcc-unaidsto-equip-faith-communities-to-end-hiv)

89. WCC jointly organised with the UNAIDS on behalf of the UNAIDS-PEPFAR faith initiative the annual Communities of Faith Breakfast focusing on building partnerships for a one-community response to HIV and prioritising children in the HIV response in New York, coinciding with the UN General Assembly on 21 September. 135 leaders attended the event from faith, civic, and diplomatic leadership.

90. The first online meeting of the Churches' Commission on Health and Healing was held on 20 October, where 23 of the 26 members met with the staff and leadership of WCC to get to know each other; the processes related to the commission and highlighted key health issues in their various contexts.

91. **Just Community of Women and Men.** Since the last executive committee meeting we have continued to strengthen the work of the programme through updates, participation in meetings, as well as planning of face-to-face and webinar events. This has included the collaborative production with Overcoming Racism on 31 August (International Day for People of African Descent) of "They Too Were Gathered," an online event commemorating the legacy of people of colour to the ecumenical movement.

92. Subsequently in September, we represented the WCC at the Church and Peace conference on Racism (Amsterdam). At the conference, the programme staff addressed ecumenical contributions to overcoming racial injustice, which received positive feedback.

93. In addition to the strategic plans, framing of the reference group members and network leadership team have begun. The recommendations await approval of the executive committee.

94. Further, the WCC participated in the Wilton Park event "Women, Religion, and Climate Change" (Sussex). Not only was this an opportunity for multi-faith collaboration, it also offered opportunity to network, and this has begun to realize positive results for future collaboration on climate and gender.

95. WCC collaborated with LWF, ACT Alliance, and Mission21 for a side event at the UN during the Human Rights Council. This event, which underscored the role of faith-based organizations in human rights advocacy, also served as the opening of the ACT Alliance international Gender Community of Practice (COP) annual meeting.

96. The Women's Human Rights Advocacy Training was held in Geneva on 16-20 October organized jointly with ecumenical partners LWF, ACT Alliance & Church of Sweden, and in collaboration with CCIA and ecumenical partners in Europe. Participants have the opportunity to meet with members of the Commission of the Convention for the Elimination of All kinds of Discrimination Against

Women (CEDAW) as well as attend a CEDAW hearing at the UN. They learned from ecumenical partners and WCC CCIA programme staff involved with human rights advocacy as well as partners in civil society and UN spaces.

97. **Overcoming Racism, Xenophobia, and related Discrimination.** Our work towards overcoming racism, xenophobia, and related discrimination in line with the mandate from the WCC 11th Assembly has gained momentum in the past months. One of the highlights was a commemorative webinar to remember the black people who have made significant contributions to the ecumenical movement.

98. The Collective for Anti-Racist Ecumenism (CARE) network has been initiated and we are receiving massive responses and interest from member churches and ecumenical partners who have indicated their support and interest in becoming part of this network.

99. In the coming year, we plan for a bigger “Week of Prayer for Overcoming Racism” campaign in March and every year thereafter.

100. We are currently working on an Ecumenical Anti-Racist Bible Study resource as well as an Anti-Bias (Unconscious Bias) Toolkit for use by member churches and partners in addressing covert cases of biases that remain in our structures.

101. Conversations around decolonization and “decoloniality” have rightfully gained attention throughout the Council and we are looking to widen consultations with member churches and other interested institutions. As part of this work, we are looking forward to engage the Pacific, Africa, and Caribbean in the coming few years.

102. As part of our contributions to peace making and conflict resolution, we hope to begin a series of in-depth conversations with experts and survivors in order to inform our responses to conflict and to direct our advocacy for just peace.

Unity, Mission and Ecumenical Formation

103. In the period under review, the Unity, Mission, and Ecumenical Formation (UMEF) programme unit highlights the following aspects of its work:

104. In the work of the **Faith and Order Commission, the commission** held an online preparatory meeting on 5 September and has initiated plans for its first in-person meeting, scheduled to take place in Manado, Indonesia, from 1 to 8 February. The international editorial team preparing for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2025 convened at Bosé Monastery in Italy from 11 to 15 September. They gathered to review the prayer material, which is nearing completion. Plans for the Nicaea2025, the sixth world conference on Faith and Order, have advanced under the guidance of the commission’s steering group, which met in Bossey from 9 to 13 October. Additionally, the second volume of “Towards the Global Vision of the Church: Explorations on Global Christianity and Ecclesiology” is in its final stage of preparation and will soon be published.

105. The year 2025 promises to be a momentous ecumenical year of anniversaries, with the churches commemorating the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and the Life and Work Conference (1925). The WCC is planning a year of Nicaea-related activities in 2025 and has thus established a staff planning group. This group is working collaboratively to develop activity plans spanning various programs. All these endeavours aim to be coordinated with churches and

ecumenical partners under the overarching theme “Living the Apostolic Faith Together Today” for the Nicaea 2025 year of commemoration.

106. A central highlight of the Nicaea commemoration will be the historic Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order. Following a thorough search for potential venues, we received an official invitation from the Coptic Orthodox Church to host this event at the Logos Papal Center, near Alexandria, Egypt. Recognizing the venue’s historic and spiritual significance, especially concerning the preservation of the Nicene faith, the steering group – appointed by the prior commission to oversee planning – recommends accepting this invitation. The contemporary situation in the Middle East emphasizes the critical importance of the unity the commemoration underscores. This unity is more than just an abstract idea. It is a lived reality that we need. The proposed and confirmed dates for the world conference, in agreement with the Coptic Orthodox Church, are 24 to 28 October 2025.

107. Approaching from the interconnected vantage points of faith, unity, and mission, the conference will explore the theme, “Where Now for Visible Unity?” Additionally, the event will be enriched by the participation of young people from around the globe attending the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI). This programme will be woven into the conference’s agenda. I am confident that the Faith and Order World Conference will draw churches closer to celebrate the unity we already share, strengthen our fellowship, and promote profound discussions about the future of the ecumenical movement.

108. The **Commission for World Mission and Evangelism** and **Mission from the Margins** has focused on bringing the commission members together, and the meetings have gone well and they are focusing on building relationships and working on the CWME materials. The commission has appointed two vice-moderators. The planning group, at its meeting on 25 October, explored how best to work creatively online globally while preparing for their first in-person meeting in June 2024.

109. Part of the decolonial work is at its opening steps as a small group of young black Europeans are now working on the concept and will gather in an in-person event on 10 to 12 November. This will set out these young people’s calls on European mission and ecumenical institutions for anti-racist action. It is planned to take place in Geneva and will include participation of some WCC staff. IRM has decolonisation as its focus for the November edition.

110. There was a consultation on evangelism and formation in Latin America, 11 to 16 October in partnership with Centro Evangélico de Misiología Andino Amazónica. The consultation reflected on different evangelism praxes and on cross-South America channels of interdenominational cooperation for the promotion of Christian witness. The Ecumenical Indigenous People’s Network (EIPN) and Mission from the Margins preparatory work for 2024 is also underway and the Indigenous Peoples consultant is developing plans for UN advocacy work and bringing Indigenous perspectives on a consultation in Sri Lanka about climate change and economic justice led by colleagues from PWD.

111. Preparatory work for the Commission on Education and Ecumenical Formation led to an inaugural meeting of the commission online on 19 October. Two working groups were established. The first will focus on accompanying the **Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE)** programme in planning and delivery of Global Ecumenical Theological Institutes (GETIs) and Regional Ecumenical Theological Institutes (RETIs); and the second will accompany the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey in developing an online Ecumenism 101 course.

112. The next GETI in 2025 will take place alongside the Faith and Order World Conference and is being planned collaboratively alongside the conference plans. We report two Regional Ecumenical Theological Institutes in collaboration with regional ecumenical organisations, in Egypt in July 2023 alongside the MECC and the next will be alongside the AACC in November 2023. In 2024 a RETI is planned in July together with CCA in Chiang Mai.

113. The **Ecumenical Institute at Bossey** welcomed 33 students from 21 countries in September as the new ecumenical studies cohort. There is intensive engagement with the study programme and with one another, building friendship and understanding. The faculty at Bossey continues to offer intensive seminars to visiting groups. In September and October ordinands from the Church of Sweden, as well as ordinands from the Church of England, then students from universities of Basel and Bern, and an ecumenical study group from Hesse in Germany came to the Ecumenical Institute. The institute collaborates closely with the local parish of the Reformed Church at Céligny and Terre Sainte. The students very much appreciated their visit to Taizé in mid-October, and they engaged in the theme of the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity at their Dies Academicus on 25 October. The residential part of the annual interreligious summer course had opened on 25 July with seven students from six countries exploring the theme “Health and Wholeness of Life in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”

114. The **Young People’s Engagement in the Ecumenical Movement (YPEM)** commission has been set up and the programme executive post has been filled. Abigale Boladi, the new programme executive, seconded by the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) of the United Methodist Church, will report with having a sense of immediate work. The YPEM work is outlined in the strategic and implementation plans. Annual activities have continued with the participation of youth. WCC was represented at the vigil organised by Pope Francis and youth will participate in the eco-school in Europe in collaboration with Ecumenical Water Network.

115. We celebrated Ecumenical Youth Day, with the theme “Young People and Their Voices from the Warzones” in August.

116. On 10-12 November, young people from the youth network are undertaking a CWME initiative to call on European missions and ecumenical institutions to act against racism.

117. From 30 November to 12 December we will have two young persons attending the COP28 representing the WCC.

118. Collaboration with Just Community of Women and Men will offer a workshop focused on preventing online sexual and gender-based violence for young people in Bossey from 11 to 14 December.

119. The **Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation** transversal welcomed colleagues from the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue (DID) in Geneva in April 2023 to strengthen collaboration between WCC and DID and to envisage joint work. In June the IRDC facilitated a conversation on “Christian Witness in a pluralistic world: Building on the Legacy of Asian Ecumenism” with Rev. Dr Wesley Ariarajah and Dr Jesudas Athyal as speakers. In July 2023, the document “Building Interreligious Solidarity in Our Wounded World. The Way of Common Formation” was launched during the interreligious studies course at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, and also livestreamed on the WCC YouTube channel. The document promotes “interreligious solidarity” as key concept and provides principles and practical pointers for common formation processes. The text was

developed by an interreligious team of educators with significant experience in formation processes of religiously diverse groups. The launch of the booklet took place in the format of an interreligious panel conversation with Muslim and Jewish partners of WCC. The upcoming December 2023 issue of the journal *Current Dialogue* focuses on interreligious relations and gender justice.

120. The programme on **prayer life** has continued to accompany staff in collaboration with sister organisations at the Ecumenical Centre. Virtual participation of leaders and members from churches across the world has widened the appeal of daily prayer. The programme accompanied the central committee in June and has accompanied other WCC meetings.

Concluding remarks

121. Reflecting on all the above information, you are able to see that the WCC continues with its work on fulfilling its objectives to: strengthen the fellowship and deepen solidarity and communion, witness together as transforming disciples, encourage spirituality, reflection, and formation, and foster innovative and inspiring communication.

122. The Implementation Plan will guide the WCC work and witness into the next eight years. We hope it will provide inspiration, partnerships, joyful service, and continued engagement with member churches, ecumenical partners, mission organisations, interreligious groups, NGOs, and others as we continue with the WCC mission of unity and justice in the world.

123. As we draw closer to completing the year 2023, I am pleased to have been serving the WCC for almost one year formally since January 2023. It has been my great joy to serve as general secretary during this time. In spite of the numerous challenges we have faced and will continue to face along the way we are thankful that by God's grace the WCC is widely valued and appreciated by our member churches, ecumenical partners, other religious organisations, NGOs, and governments in the world.

124. I owe a great deal of thanks to my wife, Sandra, and my children for their gracious tolerance of the necessary travels I had to undertake as part of the responsibilities that comes with the territory, especially in my first year of leadership and service.

125. I find it a great pleasure and joy to work with the leadership of the central committee with whom I meet once a month and more if required. I have always found great wisdom, strength and encouragement from the team, and especially from Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm with whom I work most closely.

126. I appreciate very much the interest, desire, and commitment of the WCC presidents in the work of the fellowship. We meet on a quarterly basis for reflection, update, and strengthening of our work in the regions. Thank you so much!

127. Finally and most importantly, I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to the WCC staff for their dedicated and committed work to the fellowship. They continue to deepen partnerships, strengthen the fellowship, and implement the vision and mission of the WCC. My grateful thanks to a wonderful dream team!

128. As we continue to celebrate our 75th anniversary, may the WCC grow from strength to strength and may we remain faithful Christ in all that we say and do. To whom be all glory, praise and honour!