



## **Christians, Cry Out for Peace! The Perils and Promise of Peace Today**

*Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay*

General Secretary

19 December 2023

It gives me great joy and pleasure to be with you today. As general secretary of the World Council of Churches, I bring you greetings from our 352 member churches and almost 600 million Christians in 120 countries in the world.

In these remarks I hope not so much to chronicle the many daunting challenges to peace and peacemaking in today's world—they are almost too numerous to list—but rather to assess our situation in its broadest outlines and to gauge the realistic prospects for and defining characteristics of peace and peacemaking in light of our ecumenical Christian commitments.

Formed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the perspectives and priorities of the World Council of Churches (WCC) were marked from the outset by moral abhorrence at the suffering resulting from and atrocities perpetrated in that conflict. In response, the WCC committed itself to working for the development of international law, to promoting multilateral international cooperation, and to a holistic approach to seeking a sustainable global peace founded on justice and human rights, as we proclaim Jesus Christ to the world.

So from the start the international ecumenical movement has envisioned a global influence and a geostrategic policy effect that built on denominational reconciliation and defusing the historical tensions among Christians and Christian bodies. In fact the unity and well-being of all humankind has been a constant theme in ecumenical initiatives, and Christian unity itself has been for the sake of the larger human good. Peace in the broadest sense has always been the ecumenical horizon.

### **1. OUR CONTEXT**

Today, again, we live in difficult, even perilous, times. The world is in crisis. Our current global context has been described as a “polycrisis.” Multiple threats – of accelerating climate change, aftereffects of COVID-19, ethnic and gender-based violence, overt wars and displacements, hunger, poverty and food insecurity, rising inequality and marginalization—all add to the complexities and sufferings in the world.

Currently, the world is living amidst terrible and unnecessary wars. We all know about Ukraine and Russia, and, since 7 October, the war between Israel and Hamas (a conflict with roots that go back to 1967 and even 1948). But there are many more wars and conflicts going on that don't get much coverage. There are presently, for example, more than 45 armed conflicts taking place throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

What are the main factors in conflict? Researchers tell us that there are at least five main *types* of conflict: information conflicts, values conflicts, interest conflicts, relationship conflicts, and structural conflicts. The major *root causes* include political, economic, and social inequalities, extreme poverty, economic stagnation, poor government services, high unemployment, environmental degradation, cultural division related to ethnicity or religion. Religious conflicts are prevalent in many parts of the world, though a closer examination will reveal that these are mainly grounded in socio-economic and political tensions.

The picture of conflict that I have painted is only partial; the actual situation is much worse. When one also factors in the effects of our climate emergency, it is obvious that today, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:22-24, “the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains.”

Today, the existential threat is global and threatens the integrity of life on earth as we know it. The world is facing multiple shocks — geopolitical realignment, energy supplies and sources, economics disparities, and a climate emergency. Yet the political establishments are marked by an inability or unwillingness to address these multidimensional and complex challenges. For example:

- Rising global temperatures with global mean temperatures for the past eight years have been the highest on record, fueling environmental degradation, natural disasters, weather extremes, food and water insecurity, economic disruption, conflict, and terrorism. Forest fires are becoming more widespread, burning nearly twice as much tree cover today as they did 20 years ago. Sea levels are rising, the Arctic is melting, coral reefs are dying, and oceans are acidifying. The number of weather-related disasters has increased by a factor of five over 50 years. Yet recently COP28 promised, not a phaseout of fossil fuels use, but merely a “transitioning” from them, with no agreed-upon limits or definitive timeline toward a carbon-free world.
- Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has displaced 12.8 million people within Ukraine and to other countries, which adds to the more than 100 million people (1 in every 78 people on earth) who are forcibly displaced—the highest number ever recorded since World War II. Similarly, in the Gaza Strip, Israeli response to the October 7 atrocities has cost more than 18,000 lives. In these wars, the international community and the United Nations seem powerless to stop the conflicts and force the parties into dialogue and negotiations to resolve the issues and their roots.
- Indeed, as we this year celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, we must acknowledge that peace is undermined by a dangerous recession of the postwar consensus on human rights, democratic governance, and even truth itself in the public sphere; and we must frankly admit that the international mechanisms to gain and maintain peace are simply unable to keep pace with the advanced state of violent conflict and war.<sup>1</sup>
- The global public debt has been rising over the last six decades and has now reached its highest levels. We live in a world where interest rates are raised to bring down rapidly rising inflation, which has little effect on lowering food prices. 828 million people go to bed hungry every night, and 3.1 billion people (nearly 40 percent of the world's population) cannot afford a healthy diet daily. Yet real reform of international finance, global food distribution, and their unjust consequences seem far off indeed.

Only a holistic and transformative response to these crises, one that can overwhelm the political and societal impediments to change, can rescue us from these existential challenges.

## **2. OUR COMMITMENT**

Where and what is the Christian voice in such a world riddled with conflicts, pain, and suffering? Here I look to the ecumenical movement and share briefly where the WCC stands in meeting these global challenges. Then, in light of that ecumenical response to conflict, I will address what I think more broadly should be the Christian voice in a world in conflict.

At its 11th Assembly, held in Karlsruhe, Germany, in September 2022, representatives of the WCC's member churches reflected on the current perilous state of the world, and adopted - among other important policy statements - a statement on "The Things That Make for Peace: Moving the World to Reconciliation and Unity." The assembly observed that ours is a time of "renewed and escalating global polarization, reconfiguration of governance and geopolitical alignments, division, confrontation, and militarization...with all the appalling risks that attend this context." It also acknowledged grave concerns about "the instrumentalization of religious language, authority, and leadership to justify, support or 'bless' armed aggression or any kind of violence and oppression, in sharp contrast to the Christian calling to be peacemakers."

These threats to peace, the assembly declared, "fundamentally violate the core tenets of the Christian faith" and it stressed that "the calling to dialogue, encounter and the pursuit of mutual understanding is the very essence of ecumenism and central to peace-making."

In its response to these realities, the assembly expressed its rejection of "the polarization and division of the human community" and declared the churches' "commitment... to grapple with the threats and challenges to peace, justice, human security and environmental sustainability through dialogue, encounter, the pursuit of mutual understanding, and cooperation, rather than through exclusion and confrontation."

The assembly was careful to describe "The Things That Make for Peace" much more comprehensively than the simple cessation of violence. Indeed, it called for "greatly increased investment by governments and other actors in the foundations of true human security and global stability, including for urgent action to achieve climate justice and to avert the threat of catastrophic climate change, and for a just transition to renewable energy, for the elimination of extreme poverty, for sustainable development, and for measures to control rampant inequality... all of which if not addressed will fuel conflict."

## **3. A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH**

How can we, as Christians and as Christian churches, address this context in a meaningful, authentic, and effective way? What should be a Christian voice in the midst of a world in conflict?

In its assembly, the WCC resolved to continue with a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity. This sacred journey, in which churches around the world take up the concrete work of justice and peace, will direct and embody the life, witness, and programmatic work of the council over the next eight years, when the next assembly takes place. Through our Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity, we unite our worldwide fellowship of churches not only around our shared Christian faith, which remains our vital centre, but also in the

specific interests of justice, peace, and reconciliation. That is faith's imperative and our vocation. I draw from this guiding initiative to express what should be our Christian voice in our deeply conflicted world. I believe the Christian voice should be:

### ***1. Crying Out for Repentance***

In the midst of conflicts there are invariably acts of sinfulness, injustice, and immoral behavior. In such a context, the first duty of the church is to issue the call for repentance. Sometimes we may be the lonely voice crying out in the wilderness, "Repent and believe," but that is our task. It is something we often fail to do today because we want to be popular, acceptable, and polite, but it has led to cooptation and cooperation with the powers that be, which propagate evil, injustice, and corruption. *Metanonia* (repentance) means a complete turning around from our own agendas and surrendering to the will and ways of God. Repentance is inclusive of all sins, be they political, social, economic, or even religious.<sup>2</sup>

The church must refuse to go on with business as usual in these times of conflict and violence. Yes, we learn to adjust and live on. But in the context of sin and injustice and conflicts, we must refuse to normalize the abnormal, give credibility to the immoral, and accept the illegal wars, conflicts, and factions that continue to pervade our context and world. Let us have the courage without fear or favour to prophetically call people into repentance and say, "Thus says the Lord."

### ***2. Crying Out for Justice***

The cry for freedom and justice is loud from many in the world today. God uses a number of instruments to reach and transform the world, including and especially the church. Therefore, the church needs to hear and respond to this painful cry. The mission of the church is to proclaim Christ's love to the world. The church needs to stand where God stands and not get mixed up with the rich and powerful. The language of love is best expressed in standing up for the truth and siding with the poor.<sup>3</sup>

Faithfulness to covenant relationships demands a justice that recognizes special obligations, "a preferential option" to widows, orphans, the poor, and aliens - in other words, the economically vulnerable and politically oppressed (Ex. 23: 6-9; Deut. 15: 2-11; 24:14-22; Jer. 22:16; Amos 2:6-7; 5: 10-12).<sup>4</sup> Justice then is at the ethical core of the biblical message. Hence it is a moral imperative for Christians, especially in our time. Human beings, as moral agents and agents of social change, possess the power to make positive moral choices and engage in liberative actions aimed at the transformation of society in accordance with the moral norm of justice. Justice demands that we focus especially on meeting the needs of the poor and oppressed both domestically and globally.<sup>5</sup>

### ***3. Crying Out for Peace and Reconciliation***

The Christian voice in the midst of conflict must be a voice for peace and reconciliation. It seems that the powers and principalities of the world do not like these words. It is hard to believe that in the context of war and violence political leaders do not wish to pave the way for dialogues for peace. The Christian voice must refuse to become entangled in such narratives, ours must be a way for peace. In seeking this, we must work with everyone engaging the same mission—NGOs, people of other faiths, and even those of no faith. The task of peace and reconciliation includes a number of players, including politicians and

humanitarian organizations. The WCC, as a Christian organization, works with many organizations to find solutions to conflicts in the world.

Peace and reconciliation must include work in helping people to come to terms with their realities and to seek forgiveness and to forgive others who have persecuted and acted unjustly against them. In the South African experience after apartheid, for example, there was the call for forgiveness and reconciliation. The ability of those who have been wronged to forgive their oppressors and offenders proved no easy task. Victims are often unwilling to let go of the emotional tags associated with the hurt, bitterness, vengefulness, and hatred toward the perpetrators.

In the quest for reconciliation and unity, however, forgiveness becomes an essential point of departure. You can forgive someone and still refuse to be reconciled with them but to seek reconciliation forgiveness is a necessity.<sup>6</sup> Following the example of Christ's love, churches ought to help people to be brought into spaces to forgive, be forgiven, and seek reconciliation. The love of Christ reconciles a lost and broken world, not only to God but to the whole creational order which is renewed by the sacrifice of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Reconciliation is God's gift not only to reconcile fallen humankind with Godself but also with all humanity and creation. The church itself, as a reconciled community, has to display unity, justice, peace, and love. The church should not perpetuate human divisions on race, ethnicity, gender, etc. Rather it ought to strive toward reconciliation and unity. If this is the case, then the church needs to articulate reconciliation and unity within its own life and witness so that the world may know the love of Christ. The church must work towards the renewal of all relationships and the restoration of human relationships with creation. As reconciled people, Christians have to be proponents of ecological justices and the proponents of the restoration of the integrity of creation. Again, renewal of all relationships includes working with people of other faiths and even no faith. Christians are called to do good to all people and to love the enemy. They are to be the promoters of peace in society and agents in the formation of a new humanity. The church is called to constantly work towards forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity, bearing in mind its agency in transforming society so that all may have the fullness of life. Forgiveness ought to set the social condition for the process of reconciliation to restore and heal not only interpersonal relationships but also constructively rebalance the political, legal, and economic injustices toward preventing the prospect of renewed conflict.<sup>8</sup>

As a South African, I find so many of these qualities and commitments in the life of Nelson Mandela, whose deep faith, dedication to human dignity, and unwavering commitment to racial justice also entailed racial reconciliation, however painful. His legacy is an enduring beacon for us as disciples of Jesus intent on nonviolence, reconciliation, and peace.

We witness many of these difficult dynamics of the risks of peace, reconciliation, restorative justice, and forgiveness in the still-evolving peace process in Columbia. Cuba was uniquely positioned to play a decisive role in the long negotiations that led to the historic peace accord or Final Agreement between the government of Columbia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. Revolutionary patience was required for an effort that actually took two decades and multiple starts. A key factor in the success was Cuban insistence (dating from the time of Fidel Castro) that, in our era, real change is achieved not by taking up arms but by participation in the political process. Implementation of the agreement is not without substantial difficulties, including continuing violence, driven in part by the drug trade. But

implementation is going forward, according to a recent UN report, including “bringing much needed infrastructure and investments to remote rural areas to ensuring equitable access to land and redressing the specific impacts suffered by ethnic communities during the conflict.” This to me is an example of the perilous but promising path of peace.

#### **4. *Crying Out for Unity***

Lastly, as we address the various conflicts in the world, it is important for churches to seek unity and to work together. Apart from the fact that Jesus prayed for the unity of Christians so that the world may believe, global challenges warrant that we work together to heal, reconcile, and restore creation. The Christian voice for unity is not restricted to the church but to the unity of all humankind and the total unity of all creation. In this respect, unity and justice go together as two sides of a coin. For seventy-five years, the vision of the WCC has been expressed as a commitment to *stay together, pray together, move together, and act together* as a fellowship of churches seeking visible unity and common witness. In its “Unity Statement,” the 11th Assembly invited the churches to continue their journey together as a pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation, and unity:

*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 practice 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.*

It is clear from this statement that Christian unity is needed to witness to and transform the world as we address conflicts, divisions, brokenness, and pain. Christian disunity is nothing but a feeble, weak and contradictory message to a fragmented world, while genuine Christian unity is a sign of hope to the world and a vocal testament to the power of love to heal, to reconcile, and to bring peace.

\*

In this presentation I have attempted to describe some of the conflicts in the world, looked at the importance of the Christian voice in such a context by mainly reflecting on some of the witness and work of the WCC in this regard. I believe that the Christian voice must be a voice of justice and peace, reconciliation and unity. Conflict will always going to be with us, surely, but we must never give up proclaiming and *being* the Christian voice charting and declaring the way of Christ. In the midst of increasing conflicts and wars and where there is no peace, may the God of justice, love, and peace give us the courage and strength to cry out for peace in the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> We must also reconsider the classical doctrine of just war. Can there be a just war under the conditions we see today? I refer not only to the advanced technology we see in warfare today but also to the tactics of total annihilation and indiscriminate killing that are evidenced in conflicts large and small around the globe. The scale of civilian deaths, the utter destruction of infrastructure, and the lasting damage to the environment are just a few of the contradictions to a notion that war today is ever just.

<sup>2</sup> Repentance is linked to creation. The opening sentence of the statement – “*The Living Planet: Seeking a Just and Sustainable Global Community*,” adopted at the 11th Assembly of the WCC in Karlsruhe shows this connection: “Together we believe... The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it. Human beings, created in God’s own image, are called to serve as faithful and responsible caretakers of God’s precious unique creation, of which we are at the same time an inherent part and inextricably dependent on the health of the whole natural world. A narrow anthropocentric understanding of our relationship with Creation must be revised to a whole of life understanding, to achieve a sustainable global ecosystem. We are all interdependent in God’s whole creation. As Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity, we are called to metanoia and a renewed and just relationship with Creation that expresses itself in our practical life.”

<sup>3</sup> The God portrayed in Scripture is the "lover of justice": "The King is mighty, he loves justice - you have established equity; in Jacob you have done what is just and right" (Ps. 99:4; cf. Ps.33:5; 37:28; II :7; Isa. 30:18; 61:8; Jer. 9:24). We see in his dealings with Israel how God seeks justice for his people. In sympathetic response to the groaning of Hebrew slaves (Ex. 2:23-24), the God “who executes justice for the oppressed” and “gives food to the hungry” (Ps. 146:7) pushed Moses to become the liberator, smashed the shackles of Pharaoh, and led the people to a new homeland. God’s deliverance became the paradigm of justice for Israel and continues to be so for us.

<sup>4</sup> This tradition of concern for the weak and poor was embodied in the idea of the Jubilee Year (Lev. 25). The Jubilee Year prevented unjust concentrations of power and poverty by requiring the return of property every fifty years. Similarly, the Year of Release (Dent. 15:1-18) provided amnesty for debtors and liberation of indentured servants every seven years.

<sup>5</sup> Justice must also be extended to non-human life. Thus economic policies and systems must also be evaluated socially and ecologically on the basis of their benefits and harms to the well-being of all in our interdependent relationships. Economic policies that allow the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer must not be tolerated. Economic policies that enable some to get more benefits and others to be deprived must be confronted and resisted with all perseverance. The struggle for social justice is the transformation of existing structures of state, economic order and society, so that the poor and oppressed may become full participants in the total life of society. Humankind must thus be actively, radically involved in the creation of the just society. In harmony with divine purpose, the human being (especially the Christian) must be radically involved in the struggle for justice, and willing to suffer courageously for the redemption of the human community. International humanitarian and human rights law offer our best and only protection against the brutal rule of ‘might makes right’. In the current geopolitical context, it should be the common first priority of Christians and faith leaders from every religious tradition to insist on the continuing importance of these principles, to demand that all governments fulfil their legal and moral responsibility to ensure the unbiased and consistent application of these principles in all contexts, and to refuse to be the pawns of politicians and demagogues.

<sup>6</sup> Thus Doorn (2008:390) argues that “forgiveness is possible without reconciliation. Reconciliation, however, is not possible without forgiveness.” Hence, the trend toward restorative justice involves transitional justice to cultivate an environment that fosters social change through forgiveness and reconciliation after a period of conflict (Cashman, 2014, Kidder, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> The doctrine of reconciliation is a prominent theme in the New Testament and the theological essence of the concept is expressed in 2 Cor 5:17-21, which reads: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation; the old has gone the new has come! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God!”

<sup>8</sup> Doorn 2008.