

Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace - with the Earth

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1. Becoming friends and companions in the communion of the love of God

Dear friends, fellow pilgrims

Remembering the friendship with Philip and Bärbel, I was led to articulate the theme in the perspective of friendship and companionship on the way. Together on the way, companions can become pilgrims together, people willing to move in faith and for the sake of making our faith a source of hope

- If they do not shy away to confront injustice and violence and contribute to justice and peace in transformative actions,
- If they have the courage to address poisoned memories and find a way for reconciliation and healing,
- If they pray and celebrate together in gratitude for God's gift of life and encourage each other to listen to the Holy Spirit and
- If they support each other in mutual accountability on the way

As companions on the pilgrimage, they witness that God has loved this world so much that God sent Jesus Christ, liberating humanity and all creation from the shackles of death and sin and leading them to life in fullness in the Holy Spirit. As companions they participate in the movement of God's love, which surrounds them and holds them together. In this movement of love and transformative grace companions can become friends.

If we speak of a pilgrimage of justice and peace with the earth, we have to ask ourselves how such friendship also can express not only stewardship of the earth but love to the earth. Is it time to read the great and double commandment in an expanded version to see what it really implies? Sometimes we maybe should read to ourselves "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthews 22:37ff) And maybe we should add in our mind: You shall love nature and your neighbor as yourself? We have to ask: How can you love God and counteract the creating Spirit, disregard or even destroy God's creation? How is it possible to love your neighbor (your children, those who suffer from climate changes and pollution today, and no less those who come after you on this planet earth) if you do not love the earth? We can even ask: How can you love yourself if you do not care for and love the earth? We are all nature and are depending on the relationship to nature and the resources and gifts of God given to us every day ("our daily bread").

Surely not if we move forward with the ignorance towards creation like the present US government – among all of you, I do not need to speak more in detail about this. But let us be clear that this is not just a matter for the US. We see a trend towards fragmentation, self-interest, rejection of migrants and diverse expressions of life, and other forms of divisive, even racist behavior not only in the US, but in many other countries that impacts on all of us, on life on earth and thus the life of future generations. White supremacy and racism is rightly called "America's original sin" (Jim Wallis), but original sin is not geographically limited to that continent.

It is exactly for this reason why it is not enough to call for transformative actions alone. We need to nurture the fellowship of companions on the way in solidarity with others and in love for all

creation. It is for this reason that I will focus in the following remarks concerning eco-justice and the pilgrimage of justice and peace with the earth on values of fellowship on the way. The pilgrimage must include the horizon of the unity of humankind and of all creation which requires the churches to look for unity and the deepening of the fellowship among themselves.

2. Pilgrimage of justice and peace – transformation, healing and renewal of all creation

Mindful of the journey of the ecumenical movement in recent decades with reflections on the just, participatory and sustainable society in the seventies of last century, the call of the 1983 Vancouver assembly for a conciliar process of justice, peace and the integrity of creation and the Decade to Overcome Violence that was initiated by the 1998 Harare assembly, the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan in 2013 culminated so far in the committed call to all churches, Christians and people of good will to join in a common pilgrimage of justice and peace, putting into action the prayer, “*God of life, lead us to justice and peace*”.

As a pilgrimage *of* (rather than *to* or *for*) justice and peace, it is neither an expedition to a particular geographical destination nor some one-off campaign. Rather, “[*it*] is a transformative journey that God invites us to in anticipation of the final purpose for the world that the Triune God brings about. The movement of love which is essential to the Triune God manifests itself in the promise of justice and peace. They are signs of God’s reign to come which is already visible here and now wherever reconciliation and healing are seen”.¹

As Christians, we are called to plant, nurture, and protect all creation in response to God’s will for and promise to the world, and to follow the example of Jesus Christ who charged us above all to “love [our] neighbour” (Mark 12: 31). Following Jesus therefore means listening to the cries from, responding to the needs of and standing together with and defending our sisters and brothers who suffer injustice, violence and war. In doing so, we encounter God’s abiding presence which is nothing less than a life-altering experience. “*Alive in the Spirit, [we] discover [our] deepest power and energy for the transformation of an unjust world*”, thereby contributing to the mission of healing the nations and renewing all of creation (Revelations 21 and 22).²

3. Eco-justice = making peace with the Earth

We live today in a dangerous climate of socio-economic, political and ecological crises, reflecting a brokenness of our relations with the divine, with our fellow sisters and brothers, and with the rest of the created world. Confronted with the multiple crises of life we see the faces of our suffering sisters and brothers of humankind.

Over the last few decades, the top one percent of the global population has accumulated more wealth (USD 116 trillion) than the bottom two-thirds put together.³ In this era of unimaginable plenty (with total global wealth amounting to USD 256 trillion), abject poverty persists: at least one in nine people go to bed hungry. The majority if not all of them live in the global South; many of them are women and children.

¹ WCC central committee (2014), “Invitation to a pilgrimage of justice and peace”, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace>.

² Ibid.

³ Credit Suisse (2016), Global Wealth Report 2016, <https://www.credit-suisse.com/ch/en/about-us/research/research-institute/news-and-videos/articles/news-and-expertise/2016/11/en/the-global-wealth-report-2016.html>

Industrial agro-production of commodity crops, extensive logging and militarised extraction of mineral resources to attain and maintain “modern” lifestyles, to increase profit margins and to grow the Gross National Product (GNP) have pushed our ecological systems past their regenerative limits and have caused dramatic changes to lands, oceans and the atmosphere. (Indeed humanity’s impact on the *oikos* has become so significant – to a point where it is actually disrupting the planetary machinery – that scientists are calling for a new geological epoch to be declared: the age of the Anthropocene.)

But in some parts of the world, groups of people have consumed more resources and caused more damage to our planet than others. In particular, wealthy nations and affluent sectors of society comprising the global North continue to make disproportionate use of a naturally-bounded ecological space. North America’s and Europe’s ecological footprints (an approximate measurement of human impacts on the environment) average 8.6 ha/person and 4.9 ha/person, respectively. This is many times heavier than the ecological footprint of African countries (1.4 ha/person).⁴

Climate change exacerbates these inequities. Indeed it is worth repeating that the global North is primarily responsible for the greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change (in historical and relative terms). Yet impoverished countries and the socio-economically weak (women, children, indigenous peoples and migrants) bear a weightier burden of the violent impacts of climate change, including the displacement of people living in low-lying coastal areas and small island states; the loss of sources of livelihood, reduced access to water, food insecurity, and forced migration.

So the question arises, whose *oikos* is it anyway?⁵ The biblical prophets remind us that the cries of the impoverished and the groaning of creation are interconnected, that socio-economic injustice generates ecological destruction which in turn heightens socio-economic injustice: “*Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land...the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing?*” (Hosea 4: 1-3).

If the bible does not set apart human well-being from ecological well-being, likewise, from the book of Isaiah to the book of Revelations, God's love proclaims a powerful message of salvation that embraces the restoration of just relations among peoples as well as between people and the rest of the created order. A long-lasting peace and a healed, renewed creation are its fruits. As articulated at the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation held in Kingston, Jamaica in 2011 there can be no peace among peoples if there is not justice and peace in the (global) marketplace, which is at the heart of modern economies, and *with* the Earth.

It is against the current context of life-in-creation under threat, and in keeping with a holistic (and ecumenical) understanding that integrates the struggles of the impoverished with the struggles for a restored creation, that we are called as churches and Christians to participate in a pilgrimage of eco-justice and peace with the Earth. The WCC Central Committee suggested that such a pilgrimage could consist of at least three dynamic and interdependent dimensions.

⁴ <http://data.footprintnetwork.org/index.html>.

⁵ I George Zachariah (2017), “Whose Oikos is it, Anyway?: Reimagining Ecumenical Witness in the Context of Climate Injustice”, unpublished.

As we journey together in pilgrimage, we are likely to discover again and again, some times in the most unexpected places, the beauty in diversity of God's wondrous creation. This year, the pilgrimage has a regional focus on Africa. In my visits to Egypt, Ethiopia, Namibia and South Africa, among others, I was deeply moved by the resiliency and faithfulness of the churches and people I met, but I also had occasion to marvel for instance at the fiery mountain ranges framing the city of Windhoek (so different from but equally as magnificent as the mountains, the fiords, the islands and the valleys in my own homeland of Norway) and the brilliance of the stars set against the dark night skies. In these moments one cannot but recall the words of the Psalmist: "*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the Earth! You have set your glory above the heavens*" (Psalm 8: 1). However, the relationship to nature has been and is much more than romantic admiration of beautiful sceneries. The love to nature must be the respectful, even awesome relation that recognizes both the complexity of nature as both a threat and a resource for our lives. The majestic presence of God's name is not only the golden standard of beauty, but also the powerful expressions of life that come forward all the time, particularly in what are seasons of new beginnings as we have them in the Northern (and Southern) Hemisphere. The Majestic presence is also a reality of judgement, of knowing the negative effects on our own lives when we are not respecting the integrity of creation.

Pilgrimages also bring us to landscapes of pain and suffering. In many of the aforementioned countries I visited, communities' access to clean water, food, shelter and other basic needs some of us take for granted remains a challenge. The region of Africa, which is heavily dependent on agriculture, is already feeling the consequences of a warming climate. Prolonged droughts coupled with sudden flooding have wiped out harvests and spawned famines. It is difficult to fathom how in the 21st century, at the pinnacle of world prosperity and technological achievement, children are still dying of hunger. Last 21 May, together with other ecumenical partners, the WCC initiated a Global Day of Prayer to End Famine. This became indeed a new experience of how the pilgrimage of justice and peace has a potential to bring us together as we address the needs of our neighbour and the earth together. Believe me: 70 million people checked the website!

Later this year I will be visiting some churches in the Pacific islands. For the islanders, climate change is much more than a political concern to be debated at annual international conferences convened by the United Nations. For them, sea-level rise, powerful cyclones, ocean acidification and coral-bleaching are leading to the extinction of their peoples, lands and ancient cultures. We need to listen carefully to the laments of our sisters and brothers in the region as well as to their proposed solutions.

More fundamentally, pilgrimages often inspire deep-seated changes in oneself and the world at large.

Self-transformation starts from a sense of humility – recognizing that we human beings represent a mere speck in the entire created cosmos; that we are part of the Earth and taken from it (Genesis 2: 7); that notwithstanding dizzying scientific and technological advances there are limitations to our capacities and wisdom (Ecclesiastes 8:16-17); and that ultimately we share a common vulnerability. Humility opens us up to a more profound appreciation of our interconnectedness

with and interdependence on each other and on our ecological surroundings, thereby “broaden[ing] our understanding of justice and the boundaries of who our neighbours are”.⁶

Interconnectedness is a key ecological principle and more. God declared the entire creation to be “very good”, not just one part of it. The goodness of creation stands in the way of exploitation and individual gain.⁷ Such an awakening sparks not only alterations in personal lifestyles which are not insignificant, but also a commitment to rethink and reconstruct for the common good the economic, political and social structures which engender socio-economic and ecological injustices that hurt our neighbours, our fellow creatures.

This year we are celebrating 500 years of Reformation. Larry Rasmussen whom we have the pleasure to have with us here has called for an ecological reformation. He underscores that essential to fostering ecological and climate justice is an economy that promotes the common good in such a way that “the primary goods of the commons—earth, air, fire, water, light—are cared-for requisites of a shared good, a good for both present and future generations of humankind and otherkind”.

In other words, or in ecumenical terms, we need to build an Economy of Life that “embodies God’s vision of *koinonia*, where healthy communities flourish in peace and harmony with one another and with God’s creation (Acts 2:42-47)”; that recognises that “[w]e are bound in Christ to the whole created reality in whose midst we live and on which we physically depend for our continued existence”; and therefore that “cares for land and sea, the whole inhabited Earth, which has its own God-given integrity [and forbids] the commoditization of all aspects of nature, including water, air, forests and other commons”.⁸

The spiritual dimension of transformation for the sake of the Earth should not be underestimated. When I was asked to reflect on an ecumenical perspective on the Reformation anniversary, I concentrated on the first of Martin Luther’s 95 theses against the indulgences: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent’, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” (Mt 4:17)

Sin is real. Real sin that undermines life of individuals and communities. There is no way to avoid the reality of sin through money, power, ignorance, pious practices, church doctrines, offices, or through any other means. There is no way to get around the need for repentance, conversion and the renewal of life.

Repentance is the way to receive justification by grace and to be liberated from the shackles of sin. Repentance leads to a conversion that involves all dimensions of our identity and informs transformative action. Its horizon is the renewal of life in the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luther argues that the notion of repentance is not a once-for-all action or word. It is an attitude – a way of being, representing alertness to the critical voice, an

⁶ WCC central committee (2009), “Statement on eco-justice and ecological debt”, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2009/report-on-public-issues/statement-on-eco-justice-and-ecological-debt>.

⁷ Barbara Rossing (2016), “And God saw that it was good: Reflections on the Theology of Creation” in Anne Bruggeman (ed.), *Creation – Not For sale*, https://2017.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/documents/DTPW-2017_Booklet_Creation.pdf

⁸ WCC (2014), “Economy of Life: An Invitation to Theological reflection and Action”, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/economy-of-life-an-invitation-to-theological-reflection-and-action>.

understanding of the dimension of tragedy, and willingness to acknowledge the reality of what is wrong. It is also the attitude of hearing carefully the voice of God's total forgiveness - not as accepting a deal, but as openness to change the direction of life in order to focus on the needs of the other; particularly the poor, those in need of safety, of justice, of having their rights and dignity recognized. The way towards justice and peace is a way of repentance, conversion and renewal. Anticipating the goal that qualifies already the way, our way becomes indeed a pilgrimage of justice and peace.

In other words: True repentance means real accountability to our past, as individuals and as fellowship, in the churches and as peoples (confession). True repentance means a real willingness to change, listening well to others and particularly to the less privileged and the victims of what we have done – past and present (contritio). True repentance means real actions of transformation, and an ongoing willingness to be in a process of transformation that focuses on how the other - the other human beings as well as the whole of creation - are affected constructively or destructively by my and our attitudes and actions. Transformation is the essence of a pilgrimage of justice and peace that leads to addressing the needs of the poor, in a wide sense of the term, including the less privileged, the victims, the oppressed – according to the expression “the preferential option for the poor”.

4. Just transition

The transition to a climate-just, life-affirming economy will be far from a relaxing journey. No doubt the path will be long and arduous. And along the way, some of us will have to give up and leave behind material privileges, long-held ideologies and entrenched systems that have benefitted an elite minority. Pilgrimages are never comfortable.

Yet we must begin to move forward, including by divesting from ecologically-destructive activities and investing instead in clean, renewable energy systems and in strengthening the resiliency of our communities; by making some changes to our patterns of production, distribution and consumption; and by challenging our societal obsession with material wealth and economic growth.

The transition cannot but be based on principles of equity and justice – especially in the current era marked by yawning divides between the rich and poor. Social justice and Eco justice are two sides of the same coin. At the global level, and within the framework of the international climate agreement forged in Paris in 2016, a “just transition” entails securing from governments of wealthy nations, scaled up, transparent and sustained financial support to impoverished and vulnerable nations; as well as ensuring that the various mechanisms for implementation under the agreement – such as adaptation, loss and damage, capacity-building and finance – are developed in such a way as to really enable poor nations to build adaptiveness to climate change and to carve out different, low-carbon paths to achieving socio-economic wellbeing. Churches and Christians must redouble efforts to hold our various governments and institutions accountable to the Paris commitments to reduce emissions.

Still, pursuing this crucial global agenda is not enough. We also have to act locally. At the national level, a “just transition” would mean calling for the protection of those people who are and will be most impacted by the urgent need to cut emissions and to adapt to climate change, for instance, through the provision of unemployment assistance, pensions, universal health care and other forms of social protection. It would mean holding companies responsible for harmful pollution, ensuring that they clean up their messes and compensate their victims. It would also mean

supporting people's livelihoods including by offering appropriate training and education to displaced workers and ensuring that any economic gains from a burgeoning renewables industry are directly enjoyed by communities instead of being captured by a few large corporations.

5. Being together on the way with hope

The pilgrimage of eco-justice and peace with the Earth is carried by a hope for the birth of a new Earth, a new kin-dom. This hope stems from a deep conviction that God loves and does not abandon creation. And indeed we have only look around us, within the community of churches, to discover these signs of hope.

To cite an example, churches in the US and elsewhere were among the very first to affirm, in the wake of the announcement on the US's departure from the Paris agreement, that they would continue to take steps locally, nationally, regionally, and globally to build and support a more just and sustainable future.

Following the WCC resolution to divest from fossil fuels, many more churches have joined the growing movement to divest from ecologically-depleting activities and to reinvest in sustainable and resilient initiatives. Young people have been central in advocating for these resolutions, reminding us of the intergenerational justice dimension of the challenges confronting us and the decisions we are making.

Moreover, the WCC together with other ecumenical partners such as the World Communion of Reformed Churches, Lutheran World Federation and Council for World Mission have developed an action plan for a New International Financial and Economic Architecture with the help of a panel of economists and theologians.⁹ The plan identifies changes in economic policies and institutions that aim to account for critical social and environmental tasks as to well as embed the economy in society and ecology. It calls upon churches, for instance, to demand more investments in sustainability as well as for alternative indicators of the wellbeing of the *oikos* – other than growth in GNP – that better measure the health of communities and ecosystems.

These are just a few illustrations of ecumenical responses that point to a change in lifestyles, personal and community attitudes and values, and to the urgently needed transformations of economic policies, institutions and paradigms. But there are plenty more to be found and are still in the process of creation. For the God of life who created the Heavens and the Earth and all creatures, you and me, continues to do so every day.

We are moving in the broken, polarized world, but with hope also into a deeper commitment to work for the unity for which we are created, and the unity for which we are saved through the crucifixion and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We also see how religion, and also our Christian faith, can be used by the mightiest powers in this world to create injustice, racism, discrimination, and lack of commitment to unity in justice and peace for all. But while leaders of countries will have the interest of their nation as their first priority, it is also clear that many see that the interest of the nation also extends to peace between nations, and caring for the world. We should firmly proclaim that the interest of a group or a nation in the longer perspective is what also serves the whole of humanity.

⁹ WCC, WCRC, CWM and LWF (2014), "Economy of Life for All Now: An Ecumenical Action Plan for a New International Financial and Economic Architecture",

We have to take it into our minds, into our hearts, into our hands: we are called to be one, so that the world may believe that Jesus Christ is sent from the One God. We are called to give witness to this revelation of the love of God in this world, so that the world may believe in God's future. So that the world may have hope.

We must search for unity in faith, hope and love. The call to unity is not obsolete, it is more urgent than ever. The quest for a new concern, even love for the Earth is something that comes from a deeper understanding of how we are interconnected and even united in our lives on the one planet Earth. None of us can find another "world" and escape the damages to nature and the climate. The quest for a common responsibility for the Earth is a new dimension of uniting forces in our time, both within the Christian family and also much wider, also far beyond those who have a religious affiliation and faith.

The challenges we face in the ecumenical movement and in the WCC to express this unity fully, should not lead us to ignore the call to be one, but to more efforts and more perspectives to what it means to be one. I believe, that coming generations are asking more strongly for the expressions of unity in diversity, shaping the churches' contribution to more justice, more peace, more care for the integration of creation, more love for what is our common home, more unity in a highly polarized, unjust, but also more interconnected world. The relevance of the WCC and others who search for unity will not decrease but increase, as an instrument for setting new agendas and bringing new ideas and initiatives that can bring peace with and love for the Earth, and thereby a sign of hope to the world.