

**Words of welcome to the Executive Committee meeting
at Bossey, 7-12 June 2017**

Dr Agnes Abuom, moderator of the Central Committee

“Keep the movement moving; Keep the dignity and integrity of the organization.”

May I, on behalf of the leadership of the Central Committee, take this opportunity to welcome you, sisters and brothers, to another important meeting of the Executive Committee. Thank you for coming, and may our next phase of the journey together be fruitful as we discern God’s will for us and the ecumenical movement at large at this critical historical juncture.

We have just celebrated the Pentecost and it is my prayer and hope that we come renewed, refreshed, empowered and inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue the journey of strengthening the fellowship of churches and the work for justice and peace. WCC is both a movement and an institution and there can be tension between the two components which is natural as long as it is constructive. On many personal and official visits and travels to our churches, questions about the movement and organization are raised regarding our presence, visibility, fellowship, and accompaniment. As members of the governing organs of WCC, we are almost halfway through the journey since our last assembly in Busan.

The annotated agenda reminds us of our tasks during this time together; it states: “The most critical organizational decisions and discussions to be made at this meeting concern preparation for the renewal of the WCC strategic plan and financial strategy, definition of next steps in the building project, and beginning the preparations for the 11th Assembly. Therefore, the tasks before us, in my view, as we deliberate and make decisions, are precisely to discern together how best to keep the movement moving and the integrity and dignity of the organization in a turbulent world characterized by fear of the known and unknown, desperation and a sense of hopelessness.

Two days ago, I was in South Sudan and when the people heard that the Holy Father Pope Francis would not visit as planned, some retorted: “God has forsaken us and now the Pope is forsaking us”. Many South Sudanese felt a deep sense of emotional loss of hope when they received the news. This expression was also an affirmation that people in many places, not only South Sudan, hold the church in high esteem and as their last beacon of hope for sustainable peace and justice.

Times of Transition, Uncertainty and Hope

Since our last meeting in China and for which we thank our sisters and brothers for their generous hospitality and their testimony of the life and work of the church; the global social,

economic, and political terrain/landscape has changed dramatically (in terms of justice and peace; governance and religious landscape) as you yourselves know from your churches countries and regions. Let me highlight three events that have impacted me and kept me wondering how we in the WCC and the wider ecumenical movement can enhance our strategic position, strategic mandate of working for the unity of humanity and appropriate our potential of contributing to the common good and future of all humanity.

1. The first is the recently concluded Arigatou Foundation – GNRC Fifth Forum on “Ending violence against children” held in Panama City. As WCC we had a chance to share our work on the Churches’ Commitments to Children. This is one area that we may find common ground with all religious communities in affirming life and lifting the voices of the vulnerable and voiceless in their search and cry for justice and peace. As I reflected on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace (PJP) process, my humble submission is that a focus on children provides an entry point for broader, deeper and effective engagement vertically and horizontally with actors on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The question then is how can we intentionally and coherently bring children at the centre of the PJP process? Our Anglican Church has prioritized this and asked one of the bishops to lead the process. However, we still have to find ways and means of integrating PJP in children’s work and in the life of the church and community as a whole... The stories of a young woman abducted at 12 years and escaping at 18 and a half years with two children and the rejection of returnees raised many issues. And so did the narrative of the boy who was also abducted at the age of two years and how both work with young people who escaped to restore their broken, wounded and lost years. How can our theological reflection assist churches in conflict and post-conflict situations to overcome trauma, to heal and be reconciled as communities? We all come from wounded histories. Can our mid-term evaluation give us insights into how to improve our pilgrimage work?
2. Awareness of the pivotal role of religion: the second is recognition, acceptance and acknowledgement sometimes reluctantly I dare admit, by governments and intergovernmental organizations/institutions of the role of religion particularly in contributing to peace and development. Whilst this is a positive development we need a robust discussion and interrogation of the nature and scope of our relationships and partnerships. What is our comparative advantage in the current socio-economic and political discourse/landscape as WCC or church for that matter? Are there risks that we become subcontractors of agendas that may conflict with our mandate/vision? What potentials do the opportunities provide for WCC the movement and organization/church to articulate a clear message and provide models that are mutually enriching but more important that can change the cause of direction in favour of the poor, marginalized and

forgotten communities? Is our message clear, understood or what else should we do for purposes of clarity and effective engagement?

3. Demons and spirits of fear and division unleashed: key peace practitioners and academics meet at a Jesuit university in Nairobi every so often. Last year we undertook a mapping exercise and this year we reflected on Christian- Muslim relationships. Forces of evil and death in the name of religion as well as growing racism, xenophobia, ethnicity, poor governance are creating cleavages in the churches among and within communities.

Paul reminds us that God has not given us a spirit of fear/timidity but a spirit of courage and self-discipline. The weapon of fear in organizations, in families, in communities and in nation/states has become the biggest threat to life. It is slowly eating away the social and spiritual fabric of society. Fear is paralyzing innovation, creativity, truth telling and fellowship. We ourselves are not free from this demon. It is the fear of exclusion from community life; fear of the other; fear of one's life for standing up for justice of the poor and the weak; fear of dislocation; fear of losing belief as the source of identity; fear simply of speaking one's mind.

4. Narratives of hope amidst challenges: although things seem to fall apart and the centre can no longer hold, I have as you have heard and witnessed the resilience of people, communities patching up their broken pieces; rebuilding relationships and building bridges of connectivity. Time does not allow me to share concrete examples, except to mention the monthly fast and prayer by South Sudanese women across divides; Women in Nigeria (Justina/Helen restoring hope).

Amidst the challenges and tribulations we are challenged to manage transitions in ways that will ensure the ecumenical movement keeps moving in the right direction according to the purposes for which it was founded and of course informed by the contemporary circumstances. Our deliberations and decisions should contribute to a vibrant, vital and coherent fellowship of men and women with a shared vision.

“O give me the strength, never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might.”

Let the power of the Holy Spirit renew and transform us and give us the courage to discuss and make decisions that will keep the movement moving in the direction God wants.

Once more thank you!