

For information

**REPORT FROM THE GLOBAL CONSULTATION FOR THE COMMEMORATION OF THE
CULMINATION OF THE DECADE OF THE CHURCHES IN SOLIDARITY WITH WOMEN**

“Walking Together Serving Justice and Peace”

Kingston, Jamaica 1-6 October, 2018

*“But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”
(Galatians 3: 25-29)*

Introduction

1. “Walking Together Serving Justice and Peace,” a consultation commemorating the 20th anniversary of the culmination of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women took place in Kingston, Jamaica, 1-6 October 2018.

In the context of the 70th anniversary of the WCC, the pilgrimage of justice and peace and the 2030 sustainable development agenda, the consultation was an opportunity for 73 participants from 45 member churches and ecumenical partners, in an inter-generational setting, to reflect on the achievements and challenges in building a just community of all people in church and society, and to strengthen ecumenical collaboration in reading the signs of our times in order to propose strategies for the future direction of our work. Our hosts, the Jamaica Council of Churches offered an enthusiastic welcome and superb organization, while ensuring our discussions were fully grounded in the Caribbean context and experiences of Jamaican Christians, including children who brought their visions into our reflections on the future.

Reading the signs of the times, we were acutely aware of the violence and oppression that continues in the lives of women around the world. Meeting in Jamaica, we heard the stories of women for whom “transactional sex,” appears as the only option for obtaining resources needed to care for their families. Stories of gender-based violence growing in brutality in Jamaica were echoed across the globe – women murdered in unimaginable numbers; girls in refugee camps married as protection from sexual violence; rape as a weapon of war; lives lost to racism, homophobia, and transphobia. We also heard accusations of sexual assault among people who are occupying critical offices within the church and in the society. We met while a man accused of sexual assault was poised to become a United States of America Supreme Court justice, we heard repeated stories of political and social institutions – including the

church – demonstrating new levels of misogyny and repression in response to the hard-fought struggles of so many for equity and liberation.

At the same time, our pilgrim team visits to the Women’s Resource Outreach Centre and Eve for Life gave powerful witness to the transformation taking place in lives and communities where advocacy for gender justice accompanies programmes of empowerment, education and healing. Stories of women’s leadership in bringing the experiences of women into the purview of the WCC for the past 70 years reminded us that we stand today on the shoulders of women who have insisted that the wholeness of the church and the healing of the world need the full and creative participation of women in church and society. We celebrated the presence with us of women giving strong leadership to the churches in Jamaica, several as the first in their positions. We acknowledged that “signs of the times” also includes the resistance represented by #MeToo and the Nobel prizes in Physics and Chemistry awarded to women, and the Nobel Peace Prize to the two human rights defenders from Iraq and Democratic Republic of Congo denouncing sexual violence used as a weapon of war.

2. In light of this context, the consultation focused its activities in the following areas:
 - a. Celebrating our gifts, and those of the women who went before us, visiting the wounds and transforming gender injustices in church and society;
 - b. Analysing how the Thursdays in Black campaign intersects with gender justice advocacy and recommitting to our active solidarity through the campaign for a world without rape and violence;
 - c. Reflecting on constructions of masculinities and femininities in relation to HIV and AIDS, sexual and gender-based violence, economic exploitation and other forms of marginalization;
 - d. Sharing narratives of resilience, resistance and hope in church and society;
 - e. Developing a vision and strategies for building just communities that honour the equality and sacred dignity of all, by engaging (i) church leaders, (ii) church communities, (iii) theological educators, institutions and networks (iv) ecumenical leaders, (v) secular international bodies such as the United Nations. and (vi) persons on the margins of the church and society;

3. The spiritual focus of our gathering was the image of a basket, which recalled stories of our faith: baskets of protection and peace brought to the River Nile; baskets used to gather the bread of life shared with multitudes; baskets offering a promise of escape from injustice by a Damascus wall – baskets woven of reeds and cloth; torn apart by violence and oppression. In prayer, music, dance and drama, in presentation and discussion, in biblical studies, in story-telling and powerful symbolic action; in visits to local churches and local institutions that support female victims of violence and rape and in strategizing toward the future we envision; participants in the consultation listened for God’s call as we shared the brokenness in our lives and our communities as we sought ways to reweave: from our tears and our rage, from our advocacy and our witness, from our resistance and our hope; new baskets to contain our visions for a transformed future.

From Harare to Kingston (1998-2018)

4. The Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women was rooted at least in part in the recognition that without attention to the issues – theological and societal – maintaining women’s subordination, the vision of a just community of women and men, proclaimed in Sheffield in 1981, had no chance of flourishing. The Decade brought to the fore issues of women’s full and creative participation in the life of the church, economic justice, violence, and racism and xenophobia, in international, national, and local gatherings where women and some men, named and claimed their experiences, their struggles, and their visions for transformation in relation to the aims of the Decade.

5. In Harare (1998), participants acknowledged the power in community and in voices lifted together to speak to their churches, councils and theological institutions. They shared through tears the stories of violence in women’s lives in every corner of their communities and their churches around the globe. And in some moments they also found courage to admit the cracks in their solidarity – the stories resisted or not heard – complicity in racism, their struggles to speak of sexuality, the oppressions of hetero-sexism.

6. On the journey from Harare to Kingston, there is a growing recognition that work for gender justice which does not take account of the ways that attitudes and structures of racism and the colonial legacy construct the relationships among women diminishes any possibility of building just communities. Increasingly, there is recognition of the intersectionality of gender justice work, including the inter-structured effect of varied forms of social marginalization, economic injustice, and ecological destruction.

What we have experienced in Kingston

7. Common prayers, video, short speeches, keynote presentations, buzz group discussions, written expectations, and visits to local institutions were some of the ways that participants reflected on the achievements of the past, named the wounds that are still festering, and envisioned the future. Conscious that love and justice are grounded in our relationships to God and one another, we affirmed that a most significant element was the renewal of relationships and creation of new relationships that occurred through our gathering.

8. In our discussions a number of concerns have been raised such as: the need for sustainable communities; for creating relationships among different constituency organizations to build movements for change; retrenchment in feminist commitments, action, and vision in churches and in theological education, as well as in social institutions; as well as the lack of a gender justice policy within the WCC or many member churches. Some cultural and traditional values and practices prevent women from speaking out on what they believe and on their full participation in the life of their churches. The majority of churches resist speaking of sexuality in positive, creative ways or speaking of sexual violence. As we learned from the theological content and leadership provided by youth in Kingston, attending to these issues will contribute to nurturing the next generation and the continuation of gender justice work by them.

9. Participants, in a context of common respect and trust, shared stories of pain and open wounds. We realized that ‘her story is our story’ despite our different social, political, regional, and denominational backgrounds. In Kingston our stories included those of children and youth who shared experiences of struggle in their lives, as well as strategies of resilience and hope. We described some of the sources creating and increasing pain and trauma: the continuing misinterpretation of biblical texts; support for hetero-patriarchal and racist entitlement to sexual assault; the abuse of authority instead of service and diakonia in the structures of our churches and in society; the unjust global market economy, supporting neo-colonial systems of power that lead groups of people to the margins; the insidious militarism around the globe, creating a huge flow of migrants, especially women and children; rising fundamentalism in church and society, whose effects in the church include attacks on and undermining of women’s ordination; and gender structures of injustice impacting primarily women, children, people with disability, and other vulnerable groups. Our understanding of difference transmuted into systems of domination was further informed by discussions of the wounds of racism, caste, and the oppression of Indigenous peoples.

10. The testimonies and stories reminded us that twenty years later, there are still many open questions for our Christian communities in response to issues such as exclusion of women’s experience, economic exploitation and gender-based violence pervasive in both our churches and society. These include the role of the WCC in the development of gender-based strategies within itself and the member churches; the role of theological education and formation to create positive femininities, masculinities, and to explore diverse understandings of gender and gender identity; and how to develop language and methodological tools for our churches and faith communities to advocate for women’s rights and gender justice in the public sphere. We acknowledge that in our discussion of these questions we encounter among the churches significant disagreement and diversity of perspectives on gender and sexual violence.

11. One of the gifts of this consultation was the presence of young people who are not “remembering the Decade,” but who are committed to carrying out its legacy in their lives and ministries. The consultation offered models of mentorship in moderator teams and intergenerational panels; it also demonstrated the vital involvement of youth in churches, social movements and WCC structures. Youth named the injustices that have called them to action, and they claimed their role as participants and leaders in the pilgrimage of justice and peace. In a series of “TED talks” youth participants identified concrete strategies for transformation in relation to the impact on youth of employment, globalization and migration, climate justice and racism, urging all of us into creative imagining for a future where youth can find and share hope.

12. As disciples of Jesus Christ, witnessing His Cross and Resurrection “we rejoice always, we pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances’ (1 Thess. 5, 16-18); we keep our hope alive, acting in solidarity and inter-generationally. We recognize signs of hope in the vitality of networks of “women” developed during or prior to the Decade, and we hope for new or renewed networks of solidarity that take into account multiple, intersecting struggles for justice and equity in relation to gender, sexuality, race and ability. As members of the World Council of Churches, we call for faith formation on gender sensitivity at all levels in our churches and mainstreaming critical approaches to gender in theological education,

recognizing the role of faith leaders as advocates for gender justice in society and in our churches. We hope to move from a culture of silence to a culture of speaking out and sharing, in a spirit of mutual acceptance, respect, and trust. We hope for continuous support and strong collaboration among movements, institutions, and groups working for transformation, recognizing the 'signs of the times' and the urgent needs, spiritual and physical, of people around the globe.

Vision

12. Our common biblical roots contain "texts of terror" where women are raped and murdered (e.g. 2 Samuel 13; Judges 19;) but also remind us that human beings, male and female, are created 'in the image and likeness of God' (Gen. 1.26-27) and that there is 'no male and female in Jesus Christ' (Gal. 3.26-29). Galatians 3:28, as the most significant single statement by Paul on human equality, makes people of God aware that the condition for entry into the Christian community is baptism, which envisions the abolition of all conventional discriminations among people.

13. Christian communities as a foretaste of God's reign on earth, ought to actualize the theological principle of equality and equity into the present contexts and lives of the people. Christian communities have the responsibility to become safe places for all, households of freedom and love, areas of welcoming the 'other', healing the wounds, supporting spiritually and physically the whole human being. Christian communities ought to be the vessels of the liberating message of the Gospel, critical readers and interpreters of Tradition -biblical, liturgical, spiritual- in order for all people of God to experience transformation and salvation. The theological enterprise, as the critical conscience and voice of the community, should be open to the new challenges of 'here and now', transformative and liberating.

14. The WCC as an ecumenical body of 350 member churches has a crucial role to play by offering a platform for exchanges on our experiences, sharing knowledge and good practices, and by supporting local, national and global gender justice initiatives, advocacy and action.

15. Transformation of attitudes, ethos, and structures is a dynamic, sometimes painful process that leads from unjust structures of discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudices that perpetuate violence toward the creation of a just community for all people in church and society. With this in mind the Consultation offers to the WCC the following strategies developed by our gathered community, to be integrated into the three programmatic areas: Unity and Mission, Ecumenical Theological Education and Formation, and Public Witness and Diakonia and Transversals such as Just Community of Women and Men and Ecumenical Youth Engagement.

Strategy 1

Create concrete and measurable policies that support gender equity in its structures, salaries, leadership, member churches, including codes of conduct that prohibit sexual harassment and assault

Strategy 2

Empower local organizations and groups in their opposition to all forms of gender-based violence and support for women, girls, and the vulnerable in their communities

Strategy 3

Create new and more effective ways for communication and collaboration among WCC, member churches, local advocacy groups on gender justice issues

Strategy 4

Develop urgent *action* networks to stop assaults, abuse, jailings, killings of women, girls, and other vulnerable people

Strategy 5

Name and develop responses to this political moment of backlash

Strategy 6

Enable member churches and WCC to support boys and men's organizations in becoming spaces for resistance to patriarchy and affirmation of non-toxic and anti-violent masculinities

Strategy 7

Audit institutional budgets through gender justice lens at all levels of operation

Strategy 8

Encourage research on gender justice in member churches in partnership with theological institutions and networks to influence multi-dimensional, transcultural and trans-religious curricular development