



World Council
of Churches

Voices of faith at
the United Nations



The WCC and the UN

Never before has the world been in greater need of a robust multilateral system for the coordination of responses to the mounting global crises before us. We are facing the unprecedented existential threat of the climate change emergency. COVID-19 has not only revealed our vulnerability to pandemics, but also the underlying challenges posed by accelerating economic inequalities, food insecurity, systemic racism, and forced migration. We are deeply dismayed by the growing political opposition to the institutions of multilateralism, precisely at the point in human history when they are most needed.

The World Council of Churches has been a partner of the United Nations since our two organizations were both established following World War II. The ecumenical movement is itself founded on the principle of multilateralism, and today we are a fellowship of over half a billion Christians from 350 churches in more than 110 countries. In our work for human dignity, peace, justice and the protection of God's creation, we share many similar purposes with the UN, including the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. We join with you on this anniversary occasion, to reaffirm our commitment to partnership in the pursuit of those purposes.

As you will read and see in the following pages, the WCC sees the UN as a main partner in its attempts to react to crucial historical developments in these turbulent times. May God continue to bless and strengthen our collaboration.

Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca
WCC Interim General Secretary



Photo: Albin Hillier/WCC

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The ecumenical movement has accompanied and, at times, led the quest for human rights at local, national and international levels. O. Frederick Nolde, first director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), contributed decisively as a consultant on religious liberty and freedom of conscience to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1946 to 1948. The WCC's inaugural assembly in Amsterdam (1948) issued a declaration on religious liberty and underlined the importance of the churches' work for human rights. For over 70 years, the WCC has continued to sharpen its concern, highlighting particular violations, for example racism (1968), torture (1977), and extra-judicial executions (1982).



1954 2007

Dag Hammarskjöld at the WCC 2nd Assembly

In an address entitled “An Instrument of Faith,” Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN secretary-general, referred to churches as “the guardians of and spokesmen of the deepest beliefs and the loftiest dreams of man.” These words were delivered during the 2nd Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois (USA) on 20 August 1954. In his address he was able to elaborate his vision of the role of the churches in relation to the UN, working side by side.

Peace. Human dignity. Equality. Hammarskjöld spoke of these as key words for the UN, for churches and for the world in 1954. “Problems that worry us in the United Nations must worry you, and achievements which we will be permitted to make must be welcomed by you,” he said.

Reaffirming the Commitment to Collaborate

The UN and the WCC reaffirmed their commitment to collaborate at a meeting between the general secretaries of both organizations on 29 October 2007 at the UN headquarters in New York. “As the UN faces the 21st century highlighting the interrelatedness of development, security and human rights, the WCC strongly believes multilateralism is the only way to respond to the challenges of today,” said WCC general secretary Samuel Kobia. UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon expressed “deep appreciation for the work of the WCC.” He said the council is a key member of the UN constituency, given not only what it means in terms of worldwide church representation, but also the common objectives shared by the two organizations and the “significant contribution made by the WCC in the areas of democracy and human rights.” The meeting took place at the beginning of the WCC’s “United Nations Advocacy Week” at the Church Center to the UN, in New York. Among the issues on the organizations’ common agenda, the two general secretaries discussed climate change, “one of the most critical challenges the world faces today,” as Kobia put it. He shared with Ban the concern of the council’s member churches in the Pacific, which are “already preparing for the evacuation of entire populations” from some small islands to the bigger ones.

Otto F. Nolde, director of CCIA; Dag Hammarskjöld, General Secretary of the UN; and Geoffrey F. Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury during the WCC 2nd Assembly.



Photo: WCC

Ban Ki-Moon Visits WCC Headquarters in Geneva. “Global warming will only be resolved through a global common response and we need your help,” Ban Ki-Moon said to WCC General Secretary, the Rev. Samuel Kobia, during a meeting on 3 March 2007 at the WCC offices in Geneva.

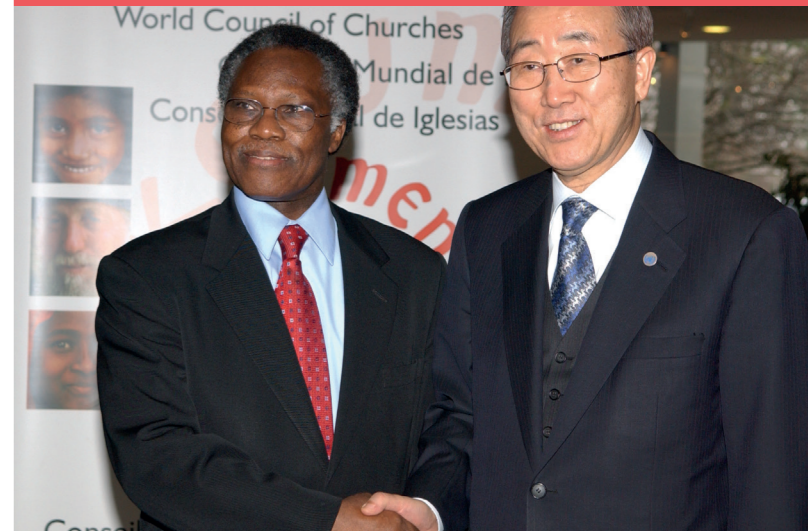


Photo: Peter Williams/WCC



Combating Racism: An Ecumenical Legacy

In the 1960s, eminent Christians like Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr, Albert Luthuli and Eduardo Mondlane deeply influenced the racism debate, and King's assassination only weeks before he was to address the WCC's Uppsala assembly in 1968 gave the matter an urgent focus. In May 1969, the WCC convened the Notting Hill Consultation on Racism. The meeting framed racism as an urgent global problem. WCC's innovative "Programme to Combat Racism" (PCR) acknowledged the historical complicity of churches with colonialism. The programme's special fund and other initiatives signaled a shift from verbal protest against apartheid to actions such as disinvestment in South Africa and material support for resistance. Over the years, the Programme to Combat Racism gave considerable attention to racism in education. In 1978 a study was undertaken of racism in school textbooks, and in 1990 PCR organized a consultation in Toronto on racism in education and the media, with emphasis on North America.

Dr Martin Luther King, Jr
visiting the WCC in June 1967.

Anti-Apartheid Movement

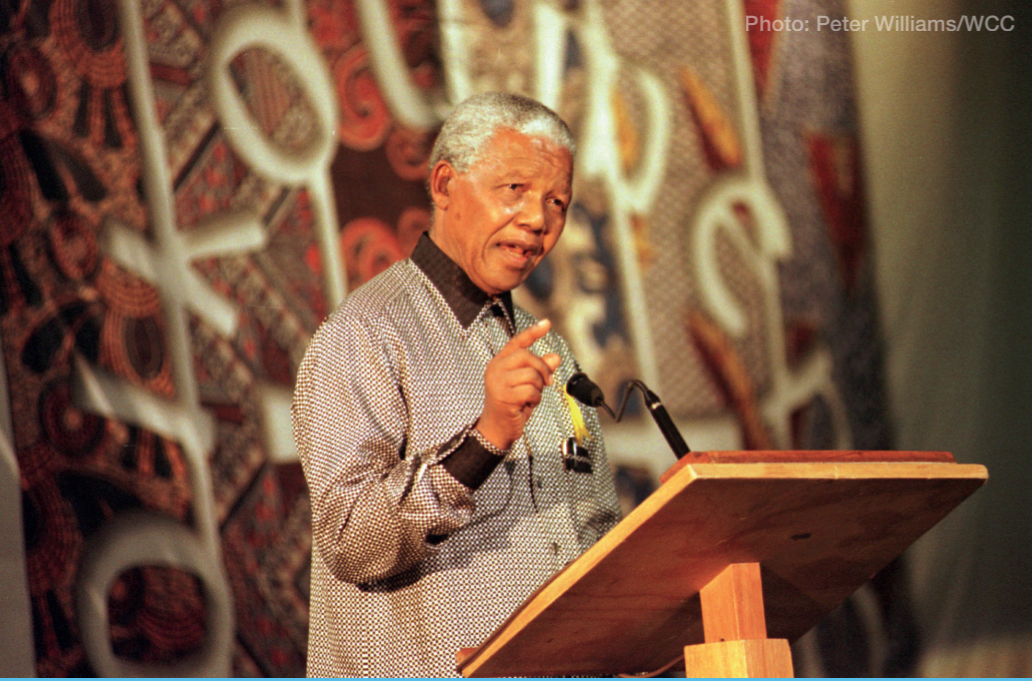


Photo: Peter Williams/WCC

Nelson Mandela gave a moving account of the contribution of the ecumenical movement to the struggle for freedom in southern Africa during the 50th anniversary of the WCC. He was described by Archbishop Desmond Tutu during the 8th Assembly as a man “who emerged from prison not spewing words of hatred and revenge. He amazed us all by his heroic embodiment of reconciliation and forgiveness. No one could have accused him of speaking glibly and facetiously about forgiveness and reconciliation.”

Few contemporary issues have more profoundly marked the life of the WCC and how people perceive it than the struggle against racism and, in particular, the involvement in South Africa. It was as a consequence of this struggle and its programmatic expression in the Programme to Combat Racism that a decisive shift in ecumenical perspective began to manifest itself. Instead of continuing to

interpret world reality from the perspective of those responsible for maintaining “order,” the ecumenical movement declared its solidarity with the victims of the structures of injustice and with their struggle for “liberation.” The condemnation of racism as sin and the rejection of its theological justification as heresy were decisive in shaping ecumenical reflection about the unity of

the church in its constitutive relationship to the quest for justice in human community. On a practical level, the WCC implemented and recommended to the member churches and to social institutions measures such as disinvestment (1972), discouraging of white immigration to South Africa (1972), refusal of bank loans (1974), and the application of comprehensive sanctions (1980).

1978

WHO's Alma-Ata Declaration

The adoption of the Alma-Ata Declaration in 1978 was a watershed moment for the World Health Organization (WHO), underlining a commitment to primary health care as key to achieving health for all, and cementing its already close relationship with the World Council of Churches. For WHO, it was a signal breakthrough in public health thinking; for the WCC, it was a particularly joyous moment, resulting as it did from a close relationship between leaders at WHO and the WCC's Christian Medical Commission (CMC), great-grandparent to today's health and healing programme. The two organizations had worked in tandem, with WHO exploring the philosophical and political basis for its future involvement in world health and CMC forging a theologically coherent framework for its own engagement.

Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the World Council of Churches Syria consultation at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Switzerland. September 2013

2013

UN Secretary-General Message to the WCC 10th Assembly

“As we focus on broad global challenges, we must pay close attention to people as key agents of change. Religious leaders can have an enormous influence on their followers, and are well-placed to help bring about a change in mindsets that can lead to progress in society. By spreading messages of respect, compassion and love, WCC members can combat bigotry and hatred, and foster greater tolerance and trust. I count on all of you to contribute to this effort by helping to lay the foundations of trust and friendship on which we can build lasting peace and prosperity in our world.”



Photo: Peter Williams/WCC

Partners for Peace Today

The Ecumenical United Nations Office



Photo: Marcelo Schneider/WCC

Housed at the Church Center for the United Nations, the EUNO is the WCC's focal point for advocacy initiatives at the United Nations headquarters in New York City. Together with ACT Alliance, through the EUNO the WCC plays a key role in convening and facilitating advocacy at different levels and building joint ecumenical strategies on priority issues. The EUNO is a key instrument, helping to create a platform for the most marginalized among us,

particularly those from the Global South, to bear witness to their experiences and truth in order to influence policy and decision making at the UN in New York, among member states, and within other intergovernmental and multilateral institutions. By engaging in continuous dialogue and programmatic cooperation with such agencies as the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF),

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and UN Women, we aim to strengthen and enhance UN discourse and practice on issues of peace and security, sustainable development and human rights. Through these dynamic partnerships, the EUNO serves to echo the call to action of the ecumenical fellowship, promoting peace building, reconciliation, human rights, peaceful resistance to violence, and sustainable development.

The WCC and UNICEF: A Common Voice for Children

In 2015, the WCC and UNICEF signed a partnership pledge to work together to support children's rights, to address violence against children, and to support children's initiatives on climate change. UNICEF works with WCC member churches—collectively representing over half a billion Christians in 110 countries—to recognize, monitor and promote children's rights within their communities and congregations. The partnership leverages UNICEF's expertise on children's rights and violence prevention together with the WCC's global network and commitment to children, in order to achieve positive change for children around the world. “The WCC is well placed to answer the international community's call to help bring about a world fit for children. From a faith-based perspective, we will call upon member churches to improve the lives of children through the development and implementation of child rights principles and tools,” said Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, then general secretary of the WCC. “The commitment of WCC's leadership to support young people as agents of change reflects the organization's goals to promote, implement and monitor children's rights around the world,” said Liza Barrie, Chief of UNICEF's Civil Society Partnerships Unit.

2013

Arms Trade Treaty

On 2 April 2013, an overwhelming majority of 155 countries voted in favour of an Arms Trade Treaty at the United Nations General Assembly. The Ecumenical Campaign for a Strong and Effective Arms Trade Treaty, led by the WCC, then advocated for swift ratification, and the treaty has been in force since December 2014. The treaty includes important provisions to protect people that were sought by the World Council of Churches and campaign members in 40 countries. As it is being implemented, the treaty is already helping to save lives and protect communities.



Photo: Michael Kelly/ControlArms

WCC and UNAIDS: Vital Partners

The ecumenical movement has been engaged in the AIDS response for over 30 years. As early as 1986 the executive committee of the WCC cautioned that “Churches as institutions have been slow to speak and to act, that many Christians have been quick to judge and condemn many of the people who have fallen prey to [HIV]; and that through their silence, many churches share responsibility for the fear that has swept our world more quickly than the virus itself.”

The WCC’s Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance has campaigned on HIV and AIDS for 20 years, advocating for access to treatment, eradication of stigma and discrimination, elimination of root causes of vulnerability to HIV transmission, and fulfilment of commitments by governments, intergovernmental organizations, religious leaders, faith organizations and individuals. Much progress has been made during this period to extend access to treatment, reduce transmission, improve education, and coordinate resources. But HIV and AIDS are not over – and political will to sustain progress and scale up effective responses that could eliminate HIV in the next generation must be bolstered. The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance has earned a high level of recognition and respect in international policy spaces and multilateral organizations, including the post-2015 civil society working group, Free Space Process, and the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board.



Photo: Gregg Brekke/WCC



Photo: Albin Hillert/WCC



Photo: Peter Williams/WCC



Photo: Freddie Allen/AMG

Top left: Rev. Dionne Boissiere offers concluding remarks at the 27 Sept. 2018 Interfaith Prayer Breakfast: Building Partnerships to End AIDS and TB in children and adolescents.

Top right: Launched in 2002 as the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA), in response to a call from Christians and churches in Africa to the ecumenical fellowship to journey with them in overcoming the HIV pandemic, EHAIA has demonstrated the need of linking grassroots, national and regional actors with international decision and policy-makers. At the WCC 10th Assembly (2013) EHAIA was given the mandate to expand beyond Africa and become active in Jamaica, the Philippines and Ukraine, countries where churches have requested that EHAIA share its African experiences and expertise.

Bottom left: In 2013, Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS, addressed the 10th Assembly of the WCC: “I am impressed and grateful for the innovative work of the WCC’s Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa, which has advanced community dialogues on HIV, stigma and discrimination, which dates back to 1998. You have made tremendous strides to increase critical awareness about HIV, expanding the theological-ethical and practical competencies of churches and develop practical tools for faith communities well beyond Africa. You must be barricades against exclusion.”

Bottom right: Ambassador Deborah Birx speaking at the EAA Interfaith HIV-AIDS breakfast. To provide an opportunity to strengthen relationships and forge new partnerships, the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, in collaboration with UNAIDS, the United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, hosted an interfaith prayer breakfast on the sidelines of the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. September 2016.

Photo: Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea



Peace convocation and march at the DMZ between the North and South Korea

Working and Praying for Peace on the Korean Peninsula

The WCC has been enabling people-to-people dialogue and cooperation between North and South Koreans for more than 30 years, in the interests of promoting mutual understanding and peace. Since its 10th Assembly (2013), the WCC has renewed and strengthened its support for and commitment to increased ecumenical efforts for peace, reconciliation, and reunification of the divided Korean people. Each year, Christians are invited to join in a prayer for peace and reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Prepared by the National Council of Churches in (South) Korea and the Korean Christian Federation of the DPRK, the prayer is traditionally observed on the Sunday before 15 August every year. In 2020, marking the 70th anniversary of the start of the Korean War, a global prayer campaign for peace on the Korean Peninsula (“We Pray, Peace Now, End the War!”) was launched. The campaign has also featured a clarion call for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula as part of a nuclear-free world.

Peace in the Holy Land

The WCC has been deeply involved in efforts for peace in the Holy Land since 1948, when the state of Israel was created and the WCC formally established. Even before 1948, the WCC in-process-of-formation sought to help European Jews escape from Nazi-occupied territories in Europe and helped them emigrate to safe havens. It later assisted Palestinian refugees displaced as a result of Partition. The WCC has repeatedly called for a comprehensive peace agreement that would ensure the rights, well-being and security of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

The WCC has also encouraged dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims to promote tolerance and harmonious relationships. The WCC’s Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) provides an international protective presence and accompaniment for Palestinian communities living under occupation, monitors and reports on violent incidents and violations of human rights, and promotes awareness-raising and advocacy for a just peace. Already at its first assembly, in 1948, churches of the WCC acknowledged both the state of Israel and the right of Palestinians to a state of their own. Ever since then, the WCC has maintained close relations with member churches and Christian communities in Jerusalem.



Photos: S.Hawkey/WCC



Photo: Ivars Kupcis/WCC

Gender Justice

In response to the crisis of sexual and gender-based violence, the WCC promotes the “Thursdays in Black” campaign, as a weekly observance for a world free from rape and violence. WCC representatives have been active in debates in the UN Commission on the Status of Women and have called for churches to be active agents for justice in the lead-up to a critical UN review in 2020. Looking to this year’s 25th anniversary of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the WCC sees strong opportunities for churches to play a key role in holding governments accountable and ensuring that real change is experienced on the ground. The commission has named faith-based organizations as one of the stakeholders in the implementation process, indicating that faith-based organizations (including the churches) have a vital role to play in ensuring that structures are established and maintained, even as governments are the official actors in the provision of access to required resources for women and girls across the world.

Climate Justice Now

The WCC has been advocating for international action on climate change for more than 40 years, and has participated actively in every UN Climate Change Conference on behalf of its member churches, ecumenical and interfaith partners. The WCC and related groups have taken strong moral positions on the fossil fuel industry that generates emissions that cause climate change. Putting their money where their mouth is, they have divested from fossil fuels, withdrawing a pool of billions of dollars from the industry. Churches and church-related groups around the world are working to mitigate the effects of climate change, from extreme weather events like typhoons and floods to long-term droughts and the failure of agriculture and fisheries.

Photo: S.Hawkey/WCC



Environmentalist and former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore met with WCC General Secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit at UN climate talks COP21, thanking him for the WCC’s commitment and action on climate.

Nuclear Disarmament

The WCC raises ecumenical concerns and advocates at various levels of national and international governance for nuclear disarmament, control of the spread of other weapons of mass destruction, accountability under the international rule of law, and fulfilment of treaty obligations. Since the WCC’s 6th Assembly (1983), the council has denounced the production, deployment and use of nuclear weapons as a crime against humanity. As an advocate of nuclear disarmament for most of its 70-year history, the WCC has been a partner and active participant in the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) since 2010. When ICAN received the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize, the WCC described it as a sign of hope and encouragement on the path to peace.

On May 2019, the WCC delivered a statement on behalf of faith communities to the Third Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Photo: Ivars Kucis/WCC



ICAN press conference on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize

It called attention to the pressing need to work productively for a world free from the most destructive weapons ever created. “Our faith-based traditions have given us both the imperative to continue this humanitarian disarmament work, even, perhaps especially, when there are so many voices of despair and pessimism,” the statement reads. “We share and value the basic human right to live in a world free from the fear of total destruction, in an environment free from contamination.”

Photo: Paulino Menezes/WCC



Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples

The WCC has a longstanding commitment to work in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples. The WCC seeks to strengthen, initiate and nurture the Indigenous Peoples' global and regional networks, build capacities of regional and local-level leadership, support grassroots' movements for justice, development, land, identity and self-determination, enable the participation and contribution of the Indigenous Peoples in the life and ministries of the ecumenical movement and churches at various levels, and support the participation of indigenous peoples in international meetings relevant to their struggle. The WCC played a pivotal role in supporting the presence of Indigenous Peoples in the UN system and in advocating for the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.



Photo: S.Hawkey/WCC



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