



God of life,  
lead us to  
justice and peace

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## **Report of the Moderator of the Central Committee**

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**Rev. Dr Walter Altmann**

1. Moderator, delegates, participants, dear sisters, dear brothers:
2. *"I tell you, many will come from East and West, and will eat at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."*
3. While thinking about what to share with you today in this brief speech of accountability, reflection and challenge I let myself be guided by a series of questions, and I took it in a very personal sense. My first thoughts referred to the sense of an assembly of the World Council of Churches.
- I. **What is the meaning of our common walk as a fellowship of churches from Porto Alegre to Busan?**
4. We are experiencing the reality of those words of Jesus mentioned above that can be found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke (Matthew 8:11, Luke 13:29). If we take as the point of reference the Holy Land, where Jesus spoke to his disciples, we move from the West to the East as we move from Porto Alegre to Busan. Furthermore, we move also from the South to the North. We move from one side of the globe to another, in the most literal sense of the term.
5. We are gathered here as a global community. Earlier today, in the opening session, we heard testimonies of young people. Let me highlight the strong meaning of the testimony given by Thomas Kang, a young Brazilian who served as a steward in our last assembly in Porto Alegre. Thomas's forefathers are from Korea. His father is from North Korea and his mother is from the South. Bottom-line, we have come from all corners of the globe and we are now inserted in the Korean reality, along with our sisters and brothers of this nation, to witness the faith that unites us as a global community.
6. It is also appropriate that, from the outset, we express our gratitude to the churches in Korea and to the sisters and brothers who have welcomed us and who have worked so diligently to prepare this unique ecumenical event. I was born in Porto Alegre, where the headquarters of my church, the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, also may be found. For me, our passage from Brazil to Korea has a personal dimension of much significance.

7. One year ago I had the opportunity to visit the churches in the Republic of Korea, in Busan and Seoul, and to have contact with local and national committees, as well as with church leaders. I could experience their hospitality and witnessed the great expectation and diligence with which they were preparing themselves to receive us. They have made significant amounts of human, technical, logistical and financial resources available for this assembly. Thank you so much.
8. The fact that we have come from all corners of the world has significant dimensions. It is in itself a testimony to the diversity in the body of Christ. Let us look around us and witness our colourful ecumenical mosaic. We speak so many different languages. At no time do we express so deeply the meaning and strength of our fellowship as when we gather and pray, each in his or her own tongue, the prayer that our Lord Jesus taught us himself, the Lord's Prayer.
9. But our diversity is wider than the differences among our languages. We represent different ethnicities, cultures, traditions and denominations of the Christian faith. The WCC has historically valued the participation of women, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities and youth. In this sense, it has developed a number of programmes, always seeking greater inclusivity and the overcoming of discriminatory practices. The gifts, so abundant among us, are very diverse. An assembly, as the one we are now holding, is as a celebration of diversity.
10. And yet, our diversity does not restrain us from building and seeking unity. Quite the contrary! The ecumenical dream sees diversity as richness, by which we complement each other. Indeed, we also correct each other, or at least we should be open to that possibility while searching for better complementarities and better expressions of unity. For, as occurred among the disciples of Christ (Mk 10:35-45), we are not immune to the temptation to consider what is "ours" as something superior to what different people bring with them.
11. We are subject to the temptation of power, as well. Throughout history this temptation has marked several levels of relations among people and nations and has led humanity to sinful practices such as racism, patriarchy, economic exploitation and multiple forms of exclusion and oppression, not forgetting sinful competition among churches and religions – sometimes to the extreme of using physical violence, war and terror. Our ecumenical commitment also becomes concrete in the shape of penitence.
12. Despite all that, in the ecumenical movement we want to affirm diversity as being expressive of the fact that we complement each other. We are called to discover and rediscover again and again how this diversity enriches us as a Christian family. This is why we are here today. In the search for a better expression of the unity of the Church, we have to acknowledge our neighbours' gifts, experiences and convictions. They can make us more authentic and more faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. We also want to keep an open mind towards possible corrections that our sisters and brothers might point out to us, as we listen to the Holy Spirit.
13. It is, of course, quite true that we often live very far from these ideals. In our midst there is still space for the spirit of competition to reign. But competition was not the ideal that guided those who preceded us in the ecumenical journey, when in Amsterdam (1948) they stated the firm intention to stay together. It is on behalf of such ideals that our churches and organizations appointed us as their delegates and their representatives. And it is these ideals that we are called to preserve and follow. In this sense, this assembly, as the preceding ones, will dedicate space for the study, discussion and adoption of a new statement on the theme of unity, underlining our core commitment.

14. The apostle gives a sustained theological foundation to our commitment to unity. It is the most fundamental element that directs us: "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Eph. 4:5-6).
15. When contemplating diversity, along with the unity of the Church, the apostle employs a rich picture of the body that has many members, constituting one single body (1 Corinthians 12:12). In this sense, an ecumenical assembly is also and foremost a celebration of unity, a unity that we already have in Christ and, being faithful to Him, we wish to seek today with even more intensity in the reality of our churches.
16. Finally, the Bible verse that was cited at the beginning of this reflection leads us to a more profound and eschatological dimension, namely, the promise of God to congregate us around the table in the kingdom, together with the patriarchs and, we may add, the apostles, in the presence of God. This promise, the prospect of future reality, anticipates that reality, albeit incompletely by our divisions, yet effectively when we gather in the name of the Lord to worship the triune God and listen to God's voice. For this reason we are gathered here.

## II. What has marked this period since the last assembly of the WCC?

17. In various ways this has been a period of transition. I begin by mentioning the international financial crisis, caused by irresponsible practices, even criminal ones, of powerful economic sectors in developed countries, countries which through political measures of a so-called liberalization have renounced the good practices of public regulation of these sectors and their economic interests. I mention the financial crisis not because I consider this the most important aspect of this era in relation to the WCC, but primarily because it has affected profoundly the world economic order. All over the world, crowds were led to increased unemployment and hunger. Multitudes were driven into despair. And, as a consequence, the crisis also affected the financial sustainability of many churches and their capacity to support ecumenical organizations around the world, and thus also the WCC.
18. Despite several efforts implemented by the administration of the WCC that, with the valuable collaboration of the members of the governance bodies, led to an increase in the number of churches fulfilling their duty to contribute to the support of the Council, the total amount received by membership fees constantly declined during this period. When we considered, in addition, the adverse exchange rate reached by the Swiss Franc, the administration and the governance bodies were compelled to undertake constant adjustments, including the reduction of the number of officers and employees, reducing the capacity to develop established programmes. This is certainly not the most stimulating framework for those who are engaged in the programmatic work of the WCC. It is also unfortunate that some churches have felt obliged to take the decision not to send a representative to this assembly, despite the subsidy offered by the WCC.
19. Nevertheless, thanks to administrative measures taken and to the dedication and understanding of the staff, to whom we are deeply grateful, it was possible to maintain a stable financial situation in the WCC. However, the question remains for the churches to answer: to what extent do they wish and are they willing to support and strengthen the WCC as a non-renounceable part of their commitment towards the ecumenical cause.
20. One of the biggest challenges in this period was to find a solution to the growing deficit in the Pension Fund of the WCC, with no prospect that the trend could be reversed. The transition towards a private

pension plan, with full respect towards the acquired rights of the participants of the pension fund, and a project that aims to development further the real estate available at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, through new construction, offers us perspective belief that a permanent solution to this acute problem can be reached.

21. We also experience a succession in the General Secretariat of the WCC in this period between Porto Alegre and Busan. Samuel Kobia was succeeded by Olav Fykse Tveit as WCC general secretary. Both have served the WCC with diligence and great personal dedication. Both had to face great challenges. Both sought close contact with the churches and the ecumenical bodies. To both alike, brothers of ours, I would like to express here today the gratitude of the central committee and of the WCC at large for their service to the ecumenical movement.
22. Another transition in progress is deeper and wider than the ones I have already mentioned. It is related to the changes in the global religious landscape. In Porto Alegre we already had begun to speak about the changing religious landscape in today's world. Over the last decades we have witnessed on a global scale a growing religious mobility and fragmentation. With regard to Christianity, our attention is drawn to the progressive shift of Christianity's centre of gravity to the East and to the South. There is a decline in the number of Christians in many Western countries, particularly in Europe, with consequent withdrawal of significant portions of the population from religious institutions due to the continuous process of secularization, or as inheritance of an atheistic education in past decades. (In the Middle East, due to conflict in the region and a consequent emergence of an adverse climate towards Christianity in many places, there has been a strong diminishing of the number of Christians, which is cause for profound concern.) In contrast to these diminishing numbers in some regions, the number of Christians has been increasing steadily, in some cases explosively, in Asia and in Africa.
23. Pentecostalism has grown considerably, although as a very fragmented movement, and has established itself as one of the great streams of the Christian faith today, not sufficiently represented in the WCC, as yet. A growing number of these churches are showing interest in WCC membership or at least seeking dialogue with us. Still, it is clear that the WCC is today less representative of world Christianity than it was when it was founded, or at least than in 1961 when the WCC welcomed the affiliation of many Orthodox churches.
24. One way in which the WCC has tried to respond to this challenge was the establishment, along with other partners, of an expanded space for meeting, spiritual exchange and dialogue. At the assembly in Harare (1998), the general secretary Konrad Raiser, inspired by the document approved there called "Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC", suggested the creation of a forum for encounter and dialogue that would go beyond the institutional boundaries of the Council. Some years later the Global Christian Forum was established as a space in which Christians from a wide range of Christianity could meet, foster mutual respect and address common challenges together. So far, the GCF has held two global meetings, the first one in Limuru, Kenya (2007), and the second one in Manado, Indonesia (2011).
25. In another significant ground-breaking initiative, the WCC, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Evangelical Alliance approved in 2011 a joint statement entitled "Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World". A recent exploratory meeting convened by the Global Christian Forum has suggested that these bodies, and also the World Pentecostal Fellowship, undertake an effort to elaborate a similar document with guidelines for the relationship between churches under a tentative title of "Christian Witness in a World of Multiple Christian Families of Faith".

26. Initiatives such as the GCF should not be seen as nor develop into an alternative to the WCC. A memorandum of understanding signed between both expresses the common understanding that they play a complementary role to each other. The WCC remains as a privileged instrument of the wider ecumenical movement. In light of the expressive religious mobility, along with the sometimes negative experience of so-called “historic” churches, there has arisen the temptation for these churches to view their ecumenical commitment as secondary and to redirect their efforts towards their own internal consolidation, be it centred on doctrinal or institutional issues. This state of affairs may also be attributed to a sentiment of disenchantment of some churches with the difficulty they experience in advancing the ecumenical programme towards unity. Be that as it may, an assembly like this one is also a highly auspicious and needed occasion to restate the ecumenical goal of the churches, a goal that is even more urgent when one looks at the current fragmentation of Christianity. Fragmentation is not an invitation to strengthen confessional fortresses, but a challenge to deepen the ecumenical commitment, not to weaken it. If the commitment to unity is neglected, the Church suffers from loss of credibility and strength in its witness. Thus, perseverance in ecumenical cooperation is a form of resistance in a world in which faith becomes increasingly a commodity in a “religious market”.

### III. With so many changes... everything is new?

27. The answer to that question is definitely no. We have a beautiful history behind us and we continue to recognize the continuity of it.
28. Luke beautifully characterizes those who follow Jesus as those who belong to “the way” (Acts 9:2). We constantly refer to the ecumenical movement as a journey. This is quite appropriate. A well-known proverb states that a journey of a thousand steps begins with the first step. Thank God, we no longer need to take the first step. Before we came on the scene, the ecumenical movement already had taken before us a good number of steps which led to today.
29. In my address at one of the meetings of the central committee, I had the opportunity to reflect on the legacy of those who have preceded us in the ecumenical journey and in the history of the WCC. We know that our roots come from major ecumenical world conferences of the first decades of the last century: Mission, Edinburgh (1910); Life and Work, Stockholm (1925); Faith and Order, Lausanne (1927). And one should also add as an integral part of our history the work on Christian Education.
30. All these streams have come together at different times either creating or joining the World Council of Churches, and they are still indispensable pillars of our ecumenical endeavour. Or can we actually picture the World Council of Churches and the ecumenical movement as such without any of these currents?
31. Without the emphasis on Christian education, mission would lose its focus and distort the witness of the gospel. Without diakonia, both mission and Christian education would degenerate into ventures without credibility. Without theological reflection and doctrinal dialogue, Christian advocacy would become random. Finally, without mission and diakonia, theological reflection and dialogue on doctrine would become an abstract and artificial effort.
32. Thus, even if for good reasons at different times and in diverse contexts, with particular gifts and abilities, we can and we must make distinctions and deal specifically with doctrine, Christian education, mission and diakonia, we must always avoid false dichotomies, as if one of these currents were more important than others. We have a holistic view of the Christian faith and a holistic view of the ecumenical journey. And we hope that it may always be moved by the love of God. For love, as we have learnt from Jesus, the apostles and the scriptures, is above all. Without it, everything will be in

vain (1 Co. 13). In fact, without love, even with a faith that could move mountains, we are nothing (v. 2).

33. In our last central committee meeting, in Crete, we had the opportunity to harvest several documents that are fruits of the work done over the last years in different areas and will also take a significant part of our attention during this assembly.
34. Thus, the central committee received and recommended to the churches for “study and formal response” the document “The Church: Towards a Common Vision”. The document elaborates impulses arising from a well-known fundamental document of the WCC, “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry”, and the reactions to it.
35. The central committee also adopted the document “Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in changing Landscapes” and recommended it as a ground material for this meeting in Busan.
36. One of the central themes of this assembly is expressed in the word “peace”. The commitment to just peace, a peace allied to justice, has been part of the life of the WCC since its creation. When we met at the Porto Alegre Assembly, we were right in the middle of the Decade to Overcome Violence, which generated a large number of initiatives in our churches. The process culminated with the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation, held in Kingston, Jamaica, in May 2011. The call to peace with justice issued by that conference, in a world so troubled by violence and war, is of great value and will also take a central part in this assembly.
37. Therefore, when we define the ecumenical journey as a process of holistic approach to our calling as followers of Christ, the currents that came together to form the World Council of Churches continue to be vivid as we develop our programs. For we are constantly inspired by the description of the experience of faith of the primitive community, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42).

#### IV. If we compare today with past times, hasn't the WCC lost its prophetic voice?

38. It seems beyond doubt that the World Council of Churches has not had more attention from the secular media of the kind it had in the past; for example, the spotlight that fell upon the WCC when it implemented the Programme to Combat Racism or the Human Rights Programme which supported people who were widely persecuted by military dictatorships, particularly in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s.
39. The panorama of international relations in a globalized world has helped attract the notice of the media to other scenarios in which the WCC cannot easily play a role of great visibility. In spite the efforts of the Communication department to inform the public extensively about the WCC, many statements on peace, for example, are easily placed in the background by media, while images of terror attacks and ventures of war take up most of the attention.
40. We might also ask ourselves self-critically if we have given enough attention to the perverse mechanisms of the global economic order, which were so evident in the international financial crisis and its tragic consequences for the people of the world. Or if we have been clear enough in calling to overcome extreme poverty in the world, a target perfectly doable if there were a clear policy and international effort in this direction. Resources far below those routinely allocated to armaments and warlike confrontations would be more than sufficient for this purpose.
41. Still, it would be hasty and erroneous to affirm that the World Council of Churches has lost its prophetic voice. At each meeting of the central committee, the executive committee or the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, not to mention our own Assemblies and the statements issued by the general secretary, the WCC has issued statements and minutes about major issues of public importance. One might even wonder if the high number of subjects touched does not

dissipate the public interest in our voice. But at each meeting we have also experienced how difficult it is to put aside any of the many pressing matters of concern to our fellowship.

42. However, in recent times we have had significant opportunities in which the WCC's prophetic voice did become audible. Let me give you a few examples. And allow me to start with one example from my country, Brazil.
43. In 2011, on the occasion of the visit of general secretary Tveit of the WCC, we delivered to the Brazilian public prosecutor of the republic a set of thousands of documents related to military lawsuits against political prisoners in Brazil during the military dictatorship (1964-1985). The files were kept safe for decades in the archives of the WCC, in Geneva. These processes had testimonies of the defendants who suffered torture, and the files were surreptitiously photocopied by a group of lawyers who were part of a human rights project sponsored by the WCC, lodged at the Catholic Archdiocese of Sao Paulo under Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, in close partnership with the Presbyterian minister Jaime Wright. The project was called "Brasil: Nunca Mais!" (Brazil Never Again). This year, with major repercussions in the Brazilian media and as an expression of support for the recently constituted National Truth Commission, a website of the project was launched in São Paulo. It provides free access to over 900,000 digitized pages on this project. On the occasion of the launch event, the WCC received public recognition for its support to the cause and the project.
44. As a second example, I'd like to mention the impact on the process that led to the United Nations' approval of a treaty on the international arms trade. The WCC was able to organize a wide network of churches around the world, advocating with their respective governments in favor of the treaty, which, at the end of a painful process, was finally approved by the UN. During the UN conferences debating the proposal in New York, the WCC worked closely with other non-governmental organizations advocating with delegations from various countries in favor of a robust and effective treaty. In meeting ambassadors and representatives of a good number of countries, the WCC could convey the conviction that it was imperative to achieve a regulation of the international arms trade in order to reduce the number of people killed or injured every year around the world. A powerful commercial interest strongly opposed the treaty, and still works against the process that leads to the implementation of a treaty regulating the arms trade. Jokingly, it was brought to our attention that there is in the world already, and has been for a good time, a treaty governing the bananas trade, but there was not an arms trade treaty. The mobilization of churches is still important on this matter, because the treaty needs to be ratified by the signatory countries in order to come into effect.
45. Among the various initiatives in which our Secretaries General have been personally engaged, let me highlight as an example recent initiatives towards joint actions among Christian and Muslim representatives in seeking to overcome cases of inter-religious violence. An example of these efforts is a joint visit to Nigeria, a country afflicted by violence with religious roots that has victimized many Christians and Muslims.
46. For over ten years, the WCC has developed a successful accompaniment program in Israel and Palestine, inspiring a similar experience in Colombia, a country that for decades has suffered from internal multifold land conflicts and is currently seeking dialogue towards a peace agreement.
47. More recently, often with necessary discretion, another set of initiatives led by the WCC took place in regard to Syria. A recent meeting was convened by the WCC gathering church leaders from Russia, the United States, Western European countries and Syria with former UN Secretary General Kofi Anan and the UN-Arab League joint representative for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi. The aim was to combine efforts to prevent external military intervention in that country which could result in unpredictable, but certainly very negative, consequences for the whole region, and to support diplomatically negotiated solutions for the conflict in Syria. This meeting deserved attention from the international press.
48. These examples and others that could be added, support the claim that the WCC today, as in the past, is called to and is exercising its prophetic role in the international public sphere.

## V. And what are we to do and to say in Busan?

49. As in all the assemblies, we will be celebrating the unity we have in Christ, which is already visible, although not yet in its fullness. At the same time we recommit ourselves to the unity we received from God as a gift and to which we are permanently called. We certainly don't want to lose sight of the target of full unity, to be celebrated around the Eucharistic table. Thus, we want to reaffirm our commitment and echo the delegates of the constituent assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam: "We intend to stay together".
50. This is the second time that an assembly has taken place in Asia, where the Christian family is a minority and lives and coexists with other, majority, religious expressions. Mutual religious respect and inter-religious dialogue in favour of harmonious relationships among religions, for the sake of achieving peace among peoples, ethnic groups and religions, as well as in favour of ethical values exercised within our society, and the urgency of care for the divine creation, are important components of our ecumenical commitment.
51. We gather in Korea, a nation still dramatically divided, that for the last six decades has lived under a permanent ceasefire, but without a lasting and just peace. We want to put ourselves on the side of the Korean people in the South and the North, stand by their side as they experience the pain of separation and as they long for reunification. We raise our hands and lift our hearts to God in intercession for reunification, for a peace with justice that establishes and preserves the right of individuals and peoples. Psalm 85:10 says: "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other." I believe that as a gathering in Korea, we could not have a better prayer than the theme of our assembly: "God of life, lead us to justice and peace."
52. In this assembly, and somehow with this report and the reception of the report from Porto Alegre to Busan, the mandate of the central committee, and also of the presidents elected in Porto Alegre, comes to an end. I want to thank all for their dedication, their discernment, their commitment and love for the WCC and the ecumenical cause. New presidents and new central committee members will be elected here in a few days.
53. This assembly also closes the mandate of the moderator and vice-moderators. I extend my gratitude to the vice-moderators for their support and their constant willingness to serve the WCC. Personally, it was for me a challenge and a privilege to serve as moderator of the central committee. There were difficult moments, but the moments of satisfaction prevailed. Trust overcame doubt.
54. I appreciate the support of our member churches, ecumenical organizations, of all those who shared responsibilities in our governing bodies, of the staff members who so intensively have dedicated themselves to the WCC. As outgoing moderator, I thank God, above all, for having put this challenge before me and for having supported and protected me through these years, as I tried with the best of my limited capacities to face the challenge placed before me.
55. I mentioned above the adage that says that a journey of a thousand steps begins with the first one. And I also mentioned that, thank God, we no longer need to take the first step, for we follow the path inaugurated by those who preceded us. We can trust that we have taken a few more steps in this journey, and we hope that those have been in the right direction. But at what point of the journey do we find ourselves? How close are we to the target? God knows.
56. When speaking of hope, the apostle Paul assures us that it overcomes everything that is against hope (Rom. 4:18). Hope is trust not in our abilities, but in the promise of God that never fails. The Brazilian Roman Catholic Archbishop Helder Camara once said during the times of oppression that the country was in need of "Abrahamic minorities", people who despite the powers in charge would respond to God's call and commit their lives to the project of God's kingdom: people who dare to trust in the promise of God, in whom we are one, God who leads us to peace and justice. Let us walk in confidence and continue on our journey also in this assembly!