



## World Council of Churches

### International Youth Day Greetings

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It is with heartfelt sincerity and even a certain urgency that I greet you today in the name of the global fellowship of Christians that is the World Council of Churches. On this 19<sup>th</sup> celebration of International Youth Day, I especially greet those of you gathered in Seoul, Republic of Korea, and in Geneva, Switzerland.

Urgency, for we know that your gathering takes place in a time of increased international tensions, looming climatic deadlines, increasing disparities of income and wealth, and great rents in the social fabric of our societies.

Further, none of these issues bypasses the more than 1 billion people in the world who are youth, that is, those between 15 and 24 years old.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the world's greatest challenges—whether of health and reproductive health, HIV and AIDS, access to education, jobs, racial and ethnic conflict, migration and trafficking and slavery—all these great world issues are most keenly youth issues.

Is this the world we bequeath to you? What are you to do in these circumstances, and what can you hope for?

I believe we can hope. Among the reasons for hope, I lift up three to you.

First, individual Christians and particularly Christians united in committed, loving service have often proved the creative minority that reframes and rethinks, then re-envision and redeems desperate situations. I am thinking of early Christian witness to pacifism and against slavery in the Roman empire. I remind you of the personal witness of the young St. Francis and his poverty-embracing followers, a stark countersign over against a church that had in some ways lost sight of the gospel. I still marvel at the Christian conviction and astonishing personal courage of the young Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King as they defied racist, unjust laws and forged a powerful movement for civil rights. And, beyond Christian boundaries, I think of Nadia Murad, whose personal suffering led to bold public witness to the torments of Yazidi women under the Islamic State and to her helping women and children victimized by genocide, mass atrocities, and human trafficking to heal and rebuild their lives and communities.<sup>2</sup>

Second, I cite the remarkable characteristics of your generation, born around the turn of the millennium. It is not just that you are more diverse, more tech savvy, more metropolitan, or better

educated than generations before you. It is rather that this generation seems to prize cooperation over competition, inclusion over exclusion, community engagement over individual passivity, and making a contribution over the narrow ambitions of making a career. The power of today's youth holds enormous potential for good.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it was youth, through the contributions of the Young Women's Christian Association, Young Men's Christian Association, the World Student Christian Federation, and the Student Christian Movement, who provided much of the impetus and leadership in the first days of the ecumenical movement.

But third, I cite the transformative power of love. I see it in our own fellowship: It fuels the ongoing renewal of Christian churches that is the ecumenical movement. But we witness it most profoundly in the person and message and love of Jesus. As he proclaimed, God's love envelops us, and God's reign of justice is at hand. Grounded in devotion to life and the God of life, love fills the deep wells of hope in us. Our ability—your ability—to give yourselves completely in a cause that is just, to let yourselves be changed by empathizing with the experiences and sufferings of others, to discover new ways of living by crossing the boundaries of race or ethnicity, gender expectations, nationality or even religious bigotry—gives us all reason to hope. Jesus' rising to new life reassures us that love will triumph, even over death, and a new world is possible.

**N**urturing personal change through love is the deepest, most transformative form of education, since it entails continual intellectual, moral, and religious *metanoia* or conversion. It is also therefore the root and catalyst of social change. We know that God is active in us, working in us to rescue and redeem the times and seed the future, if we will but attend to, accept, and collaborate with God's life-giving Spirit.

I do not want to seem sanguine or naïve, or to paper over the depth and scale of the world's perils. But I firmly believe that our situation—the world's situation, and yours—can be met by faith active in love: giving oneself over to the demands of our times, to the needs of our neighbours, and to the imperatives of justice. It is as simple and as difficult as that. I believe that your generation has the courage and heart to embrace and engage that ultimate test, the test of love. We look to the youth movements all over the world to provide leadership in the ecumenical movement and the international bodies to contribute to solving current global problems. In so many ways, then, you are our hope.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the World Bank, 42 percent of the world's population is under 25 years of age, and almost half that number reside in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. And more than 1 billion people in the world are youth, that is, between 15 and 24 years old. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/chart-how-worlds-youth-population-changing>.

<sup>2</sup> See the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize to Ms. Murad and to physician and gynecologist Denis Mukwege at [https://old.nobelprize.org/pea-press.pdf?\\_ga=2.201315175.873660876.1538722964-1765660518.1538398809](https://old.nobelprize.org/pea-press.pdf?_ga=2.201315175.873660876.1538722964-1765660518.1538398809).

<sup>3</sup> On characteristics of this post-Millennial generation, see <http://mentalfloss.com/article/555109/generation-z-will-outnumber-millennials-within-one-year>; and especially the "Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019" at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>.

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