

## Signs of the Times in the Ecumenical Movement

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*United Church of Canada General Council 43 Dinner hosted by the moderator, Rt. Rev. Jordan Cantwell and general secretary Nora Sanders 24 July 2018*

I want to thank the leadership and staff of the United Church of Canada for inviting me to represent the World Council of Churches<sup>2</sup> at the meeting of 43rd General Council under the theme risking faith and daring hope. The United Church of Canada is one of the oldest united churches in the WCC fellowship and is a founding member of the WCC. It has provided remarkable leadership in the persons of Lois Wilson, former WCC president, and Marion Best, former vice-moderator of the Central Committee. We now have Rev. Miriam Spies as a member of the Central Committee. The United Church of Canada has also helped define a new paradigm of mission as partnership, working hand-in-hand with sister churches and ecumenical partners.

The United Church of Canada is at the forefront of justice ministries and has helped strengthen the ecumenical commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The churches in Canada hosted the 6th assembly of the WCC in Vancouver in 1983; an assembly which put into motion what was to become the 1990 World Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.

The United Church of Canada has made cooperation for justice a priority in its programmatic engagements with the WCC. The WCC hosts 6 ecumenical initiatives as platforms for ecumenical cooperation. The United Church of Canada is involved with and supporting every single initiative, including:

- Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN)<sup>3</sup>
- Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI)<sup>4</sup>
- Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Advocacy and Initiatives (EHAIA)<sup>5</sup>
- Ecumenical Water Network (EWN)<sup>6</sup>
- Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Network (EIPN)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of 350 churches in 140 countries with more than half a billion Christians who confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Member churches come from all continents and include Orthodox (Eastern and Oriental), Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, United, Pentecostal, African Indigenous and other churches. A majority of the WCC member churches now come from the Global South. The primary purpose of the WCC is clearly stated in article III of the constitution. It says: "The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe."

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/people-with-disabilities-edan>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/eappi>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/ehaia>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/ecumenical-water-network>

- Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (WCC-EAA)<sup>8</sup>

The United Church of Canada is also deeply committed to WCC work on peace-building, human rights, a just community of women and men and engaging young people in the ecumenical movement. They have offered guidance and witness on how the WCC fellowship begins an urgent conversation on human sexuality and the full inclusion of LBTIQA+ persons and concerns.

When it comes to the theme Signs of the Times in the Ecumenical Movement, I do not have to reinvent the wheel. Our general secretary, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit reflected on the same during the WCC Central Committee<sup>9</sup>, the visit of Pope Francis<sup>10</sup> to Geneva in June 2018 and at the All Africa Conference of Churches assembly<sup>11</sup> in July 2018. The reflections have been in the context of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WCC. I will therefore draw heavily on the available texts.

### **1. Reading the signs of our times**

I understand the topic: “Signs of the Ecumenical Times” to mean where are we in the ecumenical movement and where do we want to be. This is a long topic to which we cannot do justice in 10 minutes. First we need to remind ourselves the ecumenical movement is here as a response to the call of Jesus to be one in our diversity of traditions and contexts. This is what Jesus Christ prayed for. He will make us one in the power of the Holy Spirit – not for our own sake, but for the sake of the world that so desperately needs healing, reconciliation and lasting peace with justice.

As we work for unity, we continue to find ourselves struggling with diversity and sometimes working in competition among ourselves. We also work in the context of anti-ecumenical dynamics in and among the churches. There are enormous powers of division, of polarization, of widening the gaps between the rich and poor, the privileged and the not-privileged (in terms of wealth, security, health etc).

In the globalised world we live in there are still shocking signs of searching the interest of some powerful nations, not the world peace or the care for the whole and one creation in this planet. There are signs of ignoring or utilizing the international law for one’s own purposes, of the deconstruction of multilateral regulations and accountability, the lack of care for the lives of innocent people, the lack of willingness to share the burdens of responding properly to the needs of refugees from situations of war and conflict, the use of the financial

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/indigenous-peoples>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/ea>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2018/report-of-the-general-secretary-the-ecumenical-movement-of-love>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/other-meetings/papal-visit/speech-of-the-wcc-general-secretary-on-the-occasion-of-the-visit-to-the-wcc-of-his-holiness-pope-francis>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/biblical-reflection-at-aacc-11th-assembly/>

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-general-secretary-speaks-on-unity-love-at-aacc-assembly>

architectures for the benefit of the strongest and the richest. We could make the list long. The theme of your General Council, “Risking Faith, Daring Hope,” sends unambiguous message that says no to exploitation, exclusion and discrimination and “Yes” to a daring hope grounded in prophetic gospel values of our shared humanity.

## **2. Conversations on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace**

In the ecumenical movement, there is a stronger momentum for moving together, as pilgrims, walking together, serving and praying for justice and peace as signs of God’s reign to come. The WCC has embarked on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, deepening unity on the way as disciples of Christ and strengthening cooperation in service and advocacy for justice, peace and human rights. The vision of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace speaks to the churches on their way together. It has implications for our relationships with the ACT Alliance, mission bodies and other partners at different levels and in different contextual realities. I see it here at the Global Council meeting through the participation of the global partners from united churches in other continents, other denominations and religions.

A milestone of this journey together was the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in March this year in Arusha. It brought together sisters and brothers from a broad spectrum of Christian traditions and the different contexts of the world. The Arusha call renews the commitment for transformative discipleship following Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. I would encourage you to read the Arusha call and engage with it.

We are also encouraged to move forward together by the different events that were organized to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WCC. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby<sup>12</sup>, and Patriarch Oditelu of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) visited the WCC<sup>13</sup> earlier this year. We celebrated together with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew<sup>14</sup> and received Pope Francis<sup>15</sup> in Geneva who came as an ecumenical pilgrim.

The ecumenical movement is affirming our common witness and advocacy by forming ecumenical peace initiatives on the Korean Peninsula, Israel/Palestine, Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Colombia, Ukraine and now Nicaragua and Cameroon. International Pilgrim Team Visits are being organised by churches as signs of hope to a people longing for peace. Risking faith and daring hope moves us together to speak truth to power at governmental levels and at the UN to sign peace treaties, abolish nuclear weapons, and end rape and violence against women, children and sexual minorities. Among the Church of Canada staff we have worked very closely with Patti Talbott and Wendy Gichiru in these peace initiatives.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/visiting-wcc-archbishop-of-canterbury-speaks-on-ecumenism-of-action>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/way-forward-in-multi-faith-nigeria-is-dialogue-says-primate-oditelu>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2018/homily-of-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-on-the-70th-anniversary-of-the-wcc>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/pope-francis-affirms-catholic-churchs-commitment-to-the-ecumenical-journey>

These joint efforts, even if they are not always as successful as we want, are bringing us together in new ways and are a common expression of our service – our diakonia – for justice and peace. The UN has defined the Sustainable Development Goals towards 2030. We can with great honour say that many of them are pursued in the programs and activities of the churches, many of them in close collaboration with ecumenical partners, particularly the specialized ministries and the ACT Alliance. The way we have shared our responsibilities in the ecumenical movement must be expressed also through a shared understanding what ecumenical diakonia is theologically, historically, and strategically today. A working document on ecumenical diakonia is on its way to you for comments.

This document is a great opportunity to show that we want to be the leading agent of an ecumenical movement of love - that is showing the love of God in practical actions together. The ecumenical challenges and potential are to be addressed now, and we have a great opportunity to move forward together now in a better sounded and better developed shared vision and strategy. We will also have a unique opportunity for that in common day between the ACT Alliance assembly and the WCC Executive Committee on November 1 in Uppsala, Sweden, this year.

Gender justice and human sexuality have been challenging for the ecumenical movement, leading to divisions within and among churches. Fortunately, when the 10<sup>th</sup> WCC assembly was faced with this challenge in 2013, the Programme Guidelines Committee made the following recommendation:

*Being aware of divisive issues among churches, the WCC can function as a safe space to enter into dialogue and moral discernment on matters which the churches find challenging. Examples which have been heard strongly in this assembly include questions of gender and human sexuality. Controversial issues have their place within that safe space on the common agenda, remembering that tolerance is not enough, but the baseline is love and mutual respect. (WCC 10th Assembly - <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/pope-francis-affirms-catholic-churchs-commitment-to-the-ecumenical-journey> Page 5 of 6)<sup>16</sup>*

Based on this recommendation, the WCC has created a Gender Advisory Group working on Gender Policy. Gail Allan from the United Church of Canada is a member of this group. In October 2018, as part of the WCC 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, there is also an ecumenical commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with women. This will give space for the ecumenical movement to reflect on the past and where we want to be 20 years from now in creating just communities of women and men.

There is also the reference group on human sexuality which is working on a document entitled *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way: Invitation to journey together on matters of Human Sexuality*. In this document you will find history, theology and practices of different churches and ecumenical partners. It does not promote any position but provides information for conversation to happen.

Racism is the theme of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace (PJP) in 2019. This will give the churches a chance to reflect together once more on the theme of racism in all its

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/report-of-the-programme-guidelines-committee>

manifestations in different parts of the world. The region of focus for the PJP is Asia. 2020 it will be the Pacific. The theme is to be determined. 2021 will be North America and the proposed theme is indigenous peoples. On the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, United Church of Canada is represented by Adele Halliday. In addition to Adele we have 3 other Canadians in the reference group of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Assemblies also mark our ecumenical pilgrimages. The next assembly is going to be in September 2021 in Germany. The theme is in formation and in one way or the other will focus on love. Love is what moves Christians to work together for peace and justice. Most likely the methodology of Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace will continue after 2021. The United Church of Canada, while practicing humility should continue to provide leadership in the ecumenical movement on the difficult issue. Your examples might be just what the ecumenical movement needs to see often in order to learn from you.