



World Council of Churches

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Geneva, February 2017

"Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Matthew 19:14

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), I am often informed about how children suffer in all continents of our world. I am also shown how churches have addressed the needs of children and continue to do so. As Christians we want to show the care of our loving God to our children and to all children, protecting them and providing them with what they need for care and safety. We now want to give this sacred task a stronger focus in our work as the WCC.

As we all have been or are children, we are given life through others; we need to be fed and we need to be clothed, we need the care of those around us, we need to learn from others, we need to be protected from dangers, violence, and illness. We need to belong to somebody, somewhere.

Today many children are presented with enormous possibilities for their present and future lives. They are significant persons in their families, communities, homeland, and in the globalized world. In all countries of the world they also face challenges, risks, even threats. Some are exposed to this much more than others, and much more than children should ever experience. This happens through conflicts, violence, and other attacks on their vulnerable bodies and souls. Many of the children today, more than ever since World War II, are refugees fleeing from their homes and protected living.

This is also the story of Jesus Christ. The narratives of the birth of Jesus in the Holy Bible convey all these dimensions of human life: care and love, as well as the enormous risks and threats to life. King Herod committed the gravest sin by killing all children in the area where Jesus was born to eradicate the threats to his power. Jesus and his family became refugees in Egypt.

As the World Council of Churches, we affirm the role of churches in addressing the needs of children. We encourage one another to be at the forefront of offering care and protection for those who are most vulnerable among us, particularly those who are wounded and are refugees. We want to contribute more in this respect, embodying the qualities of child-friendly, caring and protecting churches.

On behalf of the WCC central committee, I therefore present to you the programme "Churches' Commitments to Children." I encourage all to consider the enclosed texts presenting it carefully, examining the different aspects of child protection and ways in which we have the potential to contribute to healthy and life-giving environments for children to flourish. You are invited to respond in the way that you can.

Even as we as a fellowship of churches acknowledge our positive contributions and strong commitments to the lives of children, we have to confess that we have fallen short. We as churches can do more, and we can do more together to care for and protect children's due dignity, contributions, voices and spiritual wisdom.

In developing this programme, we have selected and named a few challenges we see as particularly relevant for us as churches. As Christians we should do more to protect children from violence whether in their homes, churches or larger society. We do give children attention, education, and guidance, but we can also do more to recognize the gifts God has given them, and also be more attentive to children's contributions in the life of our churches and expressions of their spirituality. Children grow in understanding and maturity day by day, year by year, and as they grow they should be given more opportunities to participate in discussions about issues affecting their lives. Many children live in conditions that endanger their lives, or limit the possibility for an optimistic short or longer term perspective. In the light of how we have addressed the impact of climate changes for our children and grandchildren, we find it relevant to see how children and youth can be more involved in our work together as churches to preserve God's creation and to be stewards for their future.

The Commitments you are encouraged to adopt are the following:

1. Promote child protection through church communities
2. Promote meaningful participation in the churches and the communities by children and adolescents
3. Address particularly critical issues for children in our time, e.g. to raise church voices for intergenerational climate justice, supporting initiatives for and with children and adolescents

The detailed text of "Churches' Commitments to Children" is built on a strong theological understanding of the deeply precious and yet vulnerable place children hold within our families, households, churches and societies. It is a text that bridges what we understand as Christians about the inherent dignity of children with the responsibilities held by all of humanity to protect and nurture them, enshrined in fundamental human rights.

As Christians, we believe that children are created in the image of God, with a full measure of that image from their very beginning (Genesis 1:27). Our Lord Jesus Christ showed us the example of how to offer particular attention to children and to bestow upon them love and dignity. Children are not partial people; they are fully human and worthy of dignity and respect, regardless of their gender, age, race, religion, class, capacities or accomplishments.

Churches offer a lot in response to this call; education, health care, moral guidance and mentoring, creating space in our churches to learn, to develop gifts, and to play – and much more. In many churches there are significant efforts to give children a place in prayer and worship. Many churches also pay particular attention to how to support parents in their role, and take care of orphans.

At this time in the ecumenical movement, all those of good will are invited to join in a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, a movement uniting initiatives of individuals, member churches, and partners to address common challenges. As we consider the situations of injustice in our world that call for our response and identify those among us with special need for protection, this is a moment to recognize God's particular love and compassion for children. It is an opportunity in our pilgrimage to demonstrate that they are essential to the life of churches and the world. In so doing we want to work with other partners and organizations that can strengthen our work with competence and resources to take on this significant task together.

"The movement of love which is essential to the Triune God manifests itself in the promise of justice and peace. They are signs of God's reign to come which is already visible here and now wherever reconciliation and healing are seen. Christians are to partake in these signs of God's reign and to struggle for them in response to God's will and promise."

An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace¹, 2-8 July, 2014

"Churches' Commitments to Children" emerges from the extensive experience of member churches giving attention to the value of young people as human beings and their potential within our midst. It also builds upon an agreement with UNICEF to collaborate together in advocacy and other efforts to protect children from harm and ensure their welfare throughout the world and under all circumstances.

The document identifies areas in which churches have particular ability to make a positive impact in the lives of children, in the churches and in the wider societies in which we live. Specific commitments are presented for reflection and action which can prompt essential conversations and new resolve about the sacredness of all life, and the special responsibilities we carry towards children.

Recognizing the various gifts, failures, and capacities for transformation among churches worldwide, let us move forward in our pilgrimage of justice and peace with children. Through God's forgiveness and grace, we are continually being renewed and empowered to heal wounds, strengthen efforts on behalf of children and create positive transformation.

So, I invite you to study the programme "Churches' Commitments to Children" as described in the enclosed material, and to consider how you as churches can respond to these challenges in your way, from both a short-term and longer-term perspective.

Yours in Christ,



Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit
General Secretary

¹ WCC Central Committee document No. GEN 05, 2014