

**XXVII Quadrennial Assembly of the National Council of Churches in India**  
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**World Council of Churches General Secretary**

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Dear sisters and brothers,

It is a great honour to bring greetings to you on behalf of the WCC. We are a fellowship of churches, 349 around the world, among them are churches to which many of you belong. This 27th Quadrennial Assembly of the National Council of Churches of India is a significant event in the ecumenical movement. This gathering represents a unique opportunity to renew the common call to be one for the sake of the world that needs a solid, substantial, sharp and sober Christian witness. You are manifesting important dimensions of the history and the present life of the churches here in this country, but you also make significant contributions from your context to the regional and global ecumenical fellowship. For this I express the appreciation of the whole fellowship. To you I express our expectations to this meeting and to your future contributions.

**1. The Groaning World**

A groaning world. The theme for your Assembly portrays the world in rather negative yet realistic terms. The word used here is taken from the famous passage in the letter of St Paul to the Romans, chapter 8. The use of the word “groaning” describes a very human dimension, and particularly refers to a woman’s burden of pain and longing for the end of the process of giving birth to a child. I am convinced by my wife’s assurance that there is nothing among our normal experiences to be compared to the pain of labour, and that men hardly can imagine what a woman has to go through to ensure the life of the next generation and the continuation of humankind. Saint Paul applies the word “groaning” to the whole world. It is a mode of expression indicating solidarity and compassion, taking into account the status of the whole world, every human being, children and older people, woman and man, persons of every status or class or caste, of any religion, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation or other characteristic.

It is only with a sense of awe that I can say the word “groaning”. The word means much more than the sound of lamentation and pain. Sometimes it might even be expressed without sound, voiceless, as Paul wrote in the following verses: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (8:26). Groaning expresses the cry of human beings, of all creatures, of everything alive, of nature itself. To say something about the groaning of the world may be done only if you are listening to the groaning. Moreover, to say something about groaning requires you to be in solidarity with those

who groan, to support them, to relieve them from the cause of the groaning, to contribute to change the reality behind the groaning. In some sense, we might even be accountable for the groaning. We may, indeed, be indirectly accountable through not responding to it properly. Seeing, hearing, and knowing make us accountable.

In quoting from the letter to the Romans, you have chosen a very significant theological basis for your reflections at this gathering. You are placing this event and its context here in India at the heart of the Christian faith and the heart of human reality. I am convinced that this letter to the Romans can offer you new insights into the theme, as well as to the contexts you are addressing here in India. It definitely is at the heart of the purpose of the ecumenical fellowship, especially as it is represented by the National Council of Churches of India. I will use most of my time to reflect on the text you have chosen as a part of the wider discussion in the letter to the Romans about what the Gospel is at its heart. And how challenging it is for all of us.

The combination of this theme itself, your context and the ecumenical scope of your discussion on this theme can make this event and your reflections here highly relevant for the wider ecumenical movement and the fellowship of the World Council of Churches. You can bring new dimensions to the theme for our upcoming 10th Assembly of the WCC next year in Korea: "God of life, lead us to justice and peace!" That theme, I believe, is another way to express the famous expression of the text of the letters to the Romans 8 chosen for this event.

In my preparations for this event, I have read some of the reflections in your publications and your pre-assemblies. You bring the Indian reality into the awareness of yourselves as Indian citizens, as churches, and as active members of the world wide fellowship of churches – partly embodied in the WCC. You describe the reality you know much better than I do. You also describe how the groaning of the peoples of India belongs to the wider reality of a groaning world. Your contribution is one of great significance in a wider world that is divided by economic injustice, by unemployment, by the effects of colonialism, by discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, caste, sexual orientation, health conditions and other criteria.

You also describe a world that is groaning as a creation uniting human beings, animals and all life and life-giving elements of nature, such as nature, soil, air and water. You describe a world carrying too many burdens, too much pollution, too many ways of exploiting the resources of the world, too heavy a load to be handled at the same time.

Together with my colleagues, I am impressed by the many initiatives taken and the substantial publications made by churches and church related institutions here in India to address the growing environmental challenges you and the rest of the world are facing. Along with the effects of climate changes we detect other symptoms of a crisis in the created world, signs and sighs of the groaning of the creation far beyond the

human family. These contributions to the discussion show your commitment to the protection of life and the justice of a shared world.

The very days I sat down to prepare myself for this address to you, I also was paying attention to the beginning of a court case in my own country of Norway, prosecuting the confessed terrorist who caused the death of 77 people and wounded many others, instigating fear and traumas in so many children, young people and adults through his acts on July 22 last year. The court offers a space for the dismantling of the criminality and terror, and for justice to be manifested on behalf of the living and the dead. However, the court also offers a space for witness to the reality of suffering, and therefore this trial is one among many expressions of the groaning of the world for justice and for peace in the communities and among the peoples. The court also brings a sign that the reality of discrimination, the ideology of looking at some races and some peoples as less valuable, is one of the most dangerous poisons of evil in this world. It can lead so easily to violence, as the last consequence of this kind of ideology of graded values of human beings, whatever form it might have, is that there is space here for me but not for you. Or, at least, that the privileged space is for me, not for you. And so, I come to you in great humility, as I realize that my own country can be an arena for this ideology. May God grant us the grace to resist it, and to wake up as a result of this terror by a person who brought his ideology to its inevitably bitter conclusion, the death of others who are seen as responsible for opening our society to people of other races and religions. It is shocking but also worthy of note that the church - and particularly my former ecumenical office in Oslo - was also seen by the terrorist as a potential target for this actions of terror, as the leadership of the church has argued for the welcoming and integration of Muslims in our country.

In this case, as in many cases of which we hear every day, including the last brutal months in Syria, we hear reports of the figures of injured and dead. Behind these figures are human beings, persons, families, local societies and nations groaning for justice, for peace, for something new to be born. We hear about the groaning of the world, emanating from so many, among them the members of the world wide church: the groaning for justice, for peace, for protection, for a life without violence.

Another really different context where we as WCC have tried to listen to the groaning for change can be mentioned. For decades we have heard the groaning of the people in Israel and Palestine who long for a just peace, without occupation, harassment and violence. I am encouraged to see how Indian Christians are participating in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme for Peace in Palestine and Israel. You also raise your voice for justice and peace in this meeting. Your response to this groaning is particularly significant.

There are many examples of the victims of violence. Violence is caused by many factors. Among these factors are violent political ideologies, but also so called need for

“security” that can be used to motivate use of violence against innocent people. Violence expresses a differentiation of the value of human beings, insensitivity to the suffering of others, and even arguments that violence can and should serve a higher purpose.

There are many instances in the world, some happening on a daily basis, when human beings are longing, crying and groaning for redemption. This groaning is more than noise, more than bothering cries, more than something that disturbs us. Some peoples are groaning for redemption from what seems to happen to them, without anyone to be held guilty or any explanation being given, as happens in natural disasters. Many are groaning for redemption from what has been inflicted on them due to an evil will. Some are groaning for redemption from others’ ignorance to or compliance in the reality of suffering, injustice and violence. And we have to acknowledge that as the image of groaning in Romans 8 is taken from a woman’s experience, much of the pain and injustices of the world today is particularly affecting women. Rightly, you have also in your preparations focused on violence against children.

You know the reality of the nation of India best. I know something. I know something of your liberation from colonialism, I know something about important democratic principles and systems, I know something about the inherited caste system that still has a significant influence on people’s mentality and practice in all aspects of the society. I know something about the situation for dalits, and in particular the situation for women dalits, I know something about indigenous peoples’ struggles, I know something about violence between groups of different ethnicities and religions. I know something about the enormous numbers of citizens, I know something about the many who are living below the so-called poverty line. I do not come to you as an expert on all of this. I come to you as a brother called to share some of my reflections on what is your theme, being mindful of the context in which I am speaking, being fully aware that you are the ones who can make it relevant for your own reality.

I come as a brother called to represent the calling of the WCC: To make sure that the churches call one another to unity. This means that the churches are called to make one another mutually accountable for the gifts given to them in the Gospel. This means that we in the fellowship of churches call one another to share the gifts that unite the churches and that make us live up to our calling as churches. The gift of the Gospel is not given in a virtual or abstract world, it is given where we are, where you are. In the groaning world.

## **2. The Gospel in a Groaning World**

The Gospel belongs to this reality. The Gospel shows that the world is not without empathy, it is not alone, it is not god-forsaken when it struggles in its pain, groaning for redemption. The letter to the Romans shows that there is no way to understand the

world without understanding it in the relationship to God, to God's purpose and God's laws for the human family and for the whole of creation (Romans, chapters 1-2). But the letter to the church at Rome challenges those who have defined their own position in this world with the understanding that established law gives them their own privileged position, as the representatives of the Roman Empire did in the whole region. In the Christian congregation in the metropolis of Rome there were some who according to their Jewish roots and identity had developed their own imperial attitude to others, understanding their privileged relationship to God as coming from privileged rights and observing the law of the Jewish tradition just as the loyal citizens of the Roman empire saw their privileges as a reward for their loyalty to the Roman empire and its emperors (chapter 2-3).

The law of the Torah is actually something else, it is the law showing what God expects, particularly from the privileged. It is the expression of the life-giving God, who set a framework and order for all his creation, and placed human beings particularly close together – and made them responsible for the care of creation.

The promise of God, once given to somebody, as Paul argues in this letter to the Romans, is a promise given to the whole of humanity through somebody chosen to carry it as an example for all and to become a blessing for all (chapter 4). Abraham was chosen to be the first to be justified by faith. David was blessed because his sins were forgiven. Even the sign of circumcision was a sign of belonging to a people of promise. This sign was given after God's promise and justification of Abraham by faith. Paul not only argues for the reality of the Gospel, he also argues against a misunderstanding of the law as a system of giving somebody a privileged and separate position in relation to God.

The Gospel of which Paul is not ashamed is a new word, but a word fully in keeping with the old promise and will of God for the whole of creation.

The Gospel is the powerful word of the cross of Christ that makes it clear that God shows no partiality. Even more clearly than the fact of creation and the good law of God, the cross of Christ shows that God is a God for all. The gift of atonement in the cross of Christ is given to all because all human beings need it; "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3, 21ff). This was so in a sinful world, where so easily some are stigmatized as "the other", the less valuable, the less gifted, the less important. This was so in a very concrete and particular community in a specific place and time, the small new Christian congregation in the world metropolis of Rome, where some pious people of good will struggled to get their mutual relationships right. The Gospel is proclaimed and lived in the most concrete and real Christian fellowship, as church members were struggling to understand how they could embrace one another as equal and belong to one another, even though they were different and came from different backgrounds based on birth and culture. It is in this context that the Gospel speaks, is sharpened, for the benefit of us all.

The righteousness of God is shown fully through the cross. God's righteousness, which is God's faithfulness to God's promises to his whole creation, given through Noah and Abraham, the promise of blessing and grace, of justice and peace, comes through Christ's full identification with human sinners. The heir of the promise, the Son of God (Rom 1:1-4) and the descendant of David and of Abraham, Jesus, became the elected, the anointed, the Messiah, the Christ through his full identification with the depth of the reality of all human beings, yes even the identification with the whole, groaning world. The resurrection shows that everything that happened to him was a sign of his total solidarity with all human beings and all creation, as he was "handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25).

Therefore, the Gospel shows that we all are accountable to God. I started my reflection on this theme in a court. It is impossible to relate to the Gospel without reflecting on the accountability of human beings. This is also the argument of St Paul in the letters to the Romans. The letters to the Romans is somehow built up as a legal argument, showing that before God there are no one who are without guilt and there are no one that are without the need of the Gospel of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ. There are no reasons for boasting, there are no reasons for seeking any privileges because of what we are in ourselves.

The accountability to God also makes us accountable to one another. The radical theological conclusion is this: We cannot believe in God as the creator of all and in Jesus Christ as saviour if we are showing partiality toward others, and particularly not if we are doing so for the benefit of ourselves. Or the other way round: If we show partiality or discrimination in the way we deal with others, we show that we do not believe in God the creator, in God the giver of the law, and particularly not in Jesus Christ who gave his life for each and every one of us who need the benefits of his identification with us through death and through the resurrection from death.

This is particularly true if we think that we are in a privileged situation in relation to God. The Gospel corresponds to the conclusion St Paul gives about God: "For God shows no partiality" (Romans 2:11). The presence of injustice in our world, the practice of discrimination, the basis of all human sin is that we do not understand properly what it means to believe in the God who shows no partiality.

This human shortcoming of partiality and discrimination subverts the purpose of our being, particularly among those who might think that they have some kind of privileged position in relation to God – and therefore, in relation to other human beings -- because of their inherited rights or identity. We all fall short of the standard required of human beings, to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. That provides no reason for comfort, for anybody. The fundamental equality of humanity is in terms of our universal need for the Gospel. Paul writes that he himself is a debtor to all – the Gospel is for

everybody, without distinction (Romans 1:14-15). It is in this reality of our universal need that Paul brings a message regarded by many as “foolish”, this Gospel is preached and manifested and, in spite of opposition, St Paul is not ashamed of it (Roman 1:16).

We can reflect on the suffering of human life out of the perspective of the given reality of life, where we are all under the law of death. The life we experience has a dimension of ambiguity. It is limited; so is our strength and our health, our ability to resist and handle suffering and limitations of life. The dimensions of suffering caused by being part of creation, with its limitations and the power of death in the struggle for life, represent a reality in which we live every day. So, we might ask, what is our part in all this? What is the extent of our responsibility when we think of our role in the world?

The mystery of evil is to a large extent impossible to grasp. What makes life so difficult for some of us? Why are some born with obstacles that make them less able to participate in the fair sharing of the resources of the world, and why are some given so many more opportunities than others? Why are some experiencing discrimination, stigmatization, different types of downgrading by others, even in the fellowship that calls itself the Christian church? Why should some be born into a reality of being less privileged, or even discriminated against? Why do some become victims of discrimination?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ came into a world of human beings that was troubled by frustration, suffering, illness, even natural disasters, and the interpretation of these realities. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, his teaching and his actions, his cross and his resurrection, do not bring a ready answer to the question of why there is this mystery of evil, in the sense of an explanation. What is far more important is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings a response to the reality of evil, of discrimination, of partiality, of sin.

This response through the cross and resurrection constitutes a dismantling of all kinds of evil, a dismantling of human pride, a dismantling of the will of evil, a dismantling of the abuse of authority and power. It brings a protest to the world as it was and as we still experience it. This protest is given through both a revelation of the truth of the character of human sinfulness, human equality in that sense, but much more in the form of a protest against evil by raising up those who have been trampled on, everybody who is a victim of evil and sin, everyone who is groaning.

The Gospel is for the world, belongs to the world, a world in which there is groaning. But the Gospel also encourages celebrations of life thanks to its message of hope and love. The Gospel brings something new to the world through Christ. The Gospel also confirms and interprets the reality of the world, in creation and in humanity, affirming the creation as a blessing of God, giving life and meaning, but also as a fallen and suffering world. However, even more important, there is a mystery of life, a mystery of good, a mystery of faith.

The Gospel is the life-giving word of God that can bring glad news. News in the sense that there is something more, something new coming into the world, bringing life. That is what the Gospel conveys.

We are in the time of Easter. The Gospel can be read and heard only from the perspective of Christ's resurrection: Christ is risen! The good news brings something new, again and again, in the sense that something, or rather somebody has been given who can renew the world and transform the world into a new reality.

The Gospel is always *relating* to the world as it is now, not to an ideal world. Jesus Christ addressed human beings. He met them, as they were, in the context where he found them, and he was perceived according to their particular positions and points of view.

The Gospel is always *challenging* the world as it offers another, transformed reality a vision of another world than the one which has been shaped by the effects of sin and evil.

The Gospel of the Cross of Christ challenges all authorities who abuse their role and laws, whether they are political or religious, whether they are national or international, local or imperial. The Gospel of righteousness given in Jesus Christ is always challenging our tendency to be complacent with any authority that is not used to protect justice and the rights of every human being. The Gospel of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is always challenging any acceptance of deterioration of the quality of life for anyone due to their race, gender, caste, ethnicity. Nothing can take away the new reality of God's love for everyone, a reality that transcends all other realities established by sin - whoever might be the agent of sin.

Therefore Paul concludes his reflection about the groaning world with words that can comfort and therefore liberate anybody at any time and in any situation: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (8, 38f)

### **3. The Gospel and the Church in a Groaning World**

So, why discuss this in a context of the Church? The fellowship in the Church is the fellowship established by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the fellowship in which new life and the longing, the groaning for new life is the common song. The fellowship in the Church should always be a sign of the empathy of God with everyone who is suffering, groaning, longing for relief, for the belief in new life and not accepting the domination of conditions of sin and discrimination. For those who are in Christ there is a new reality, not condemnation, not hopelessness, not partiality (8:1).

You, as churches in India, carry the legacy of Saint Thomas the apostle. In the gospel texts after Easter we are reminded of his role in the manifestation of the risen Lord. He comes to the fellowship of disciples, where the risen Christ is also present. He comes with a demand for some sign, a tangible sign of the reality of the resurrection. The risen Christ invites him to touch the marks of reality. Which reality? The reality of suffering, of groaning, of death. The reality we know in Christ will always remain the reality of solidarity with those who suffer from injustice, from abuse of authority, of power, the reality of suffering as a consequence of sin and evil. The messengers of the resurrection, of new life in Christ, must always invite the faithful to the touch of the reality of the groaning of the world, to be true witnesses of the resurrection. Not to glorify pain or suffering, rather to the contrary: this is what Christ has come to liberate us from. The church, wherever it is, in India or elsewhere, is only following in the footsteps of the apostle Thomas when it is willing to touch the reality of one who is suffering, those who are groaning, even touch their skin and their wounds. It is in this reality, and only when we make this reality our own reality, just as Jesus Christ made this his own reality, that we can be Church and give a true witness to the hope we know in Jesus. The new life of the Gospel is what can touch every situation and everybody, yes, everybody. There is nothing and nobody untouchable in the light of the Gospel. If something or someone becomes untouchable for those who bear the Gospel, the Gospel is lost.

According to St Paul (as he writes in Romans 8:23f), the Church is groaning. It is a groaning for redemption from the bondage of this world. The Church is the first fruit of the redemption of God. This means that the Church is in the world, and of the world in the sense that the Church belongs to the reality of this world: We are created human beings, we are brought into a fellowship through our baptism, the tradition of the Church and the present reality of relations in the Church, locally, nationally, regionally, globally. The church relates always to the Gospel. Without the Gospel as the life-giving word, there would be no call to repentance, no call to discipleship, no call to communion, to be one, no message of the risen Christ to be shared, no call to become one in the fellowship of peace with the present Christ. Through the Holy Spirit the reality of the Church is established by the words of the Gospel. The Church is always, from the very beginning of the fellowship with Jesus Christ, called to be a fellowship that lives by the Gospel and shares the Gospel.

In this sense the Church is the first fruit of the work of the Spirit and created by the Word of God.

The Church is given the calling to receive the Gospel so that it can witness the new creation in the Church, so that it can fulfil the mission to share the Gospel with those for whom the Gospel is given: with all peoples, with all layers of peoples, with all kind of peoples, with all generations. The Church is called to share the Gospel so that the world

may be renewed in the way God wants. The Church is called to receive the new reality and to be the ministry of the new reality in Christ, for all, for one another.

The chapters of the letter to the Romans that follow chapter 8 give further consideration to the diversity and differences in the church at Rome. Chapters 9-11 show the relationship between Jews and Gentiles as a paradigm for resolving the question of unity in the Church. The unity of Christians is always a unity among those who are different, those who have different gifts, personalities, histories, cultures, opinions, beliefs and priorities - and who still are in need of the love of God, while falling short of the glory of God. This is a clear reminder also to the non-Jews, who might think they are superseding an older brother or sister. It is always proper to call for humility, to call anybody to humility.

#### **4. The mutual accountability of the Church for the Gospel to the groaning world**

Everything we have that defines our deepest relations in life, our relationship with the creator of life, is a gift from God. We have not received our relationship to God as a token of a privileged group or as our prerogative. We relate to God the creator; to the risen Christ who includes us all - even the demanding and critical Thomas - in his generosity and graceful fellowship; to the Spirit who is with us and gives us hope in any situation and prays for us with expressions we are not able to formulate. Paul concludes this round of reflection on the differences between those who belong to the new reality of hope in the groaning world: They all have received what they are as a gift. "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (11:35f).

Therefore, we are accountable for our lives and for faith, for our gifts and our identities, as something that belongs to God. The groaning world needs a fellowship where we are called "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (12:3-6).

We are here to reflect on the Gospel and its message and its role in the world in which we live. We cannot do so without reflecting on who we are, what we represent. You are here as representatives of different churches in this marvellous and magnificent nation - and subcontinent - of India. In India, many of your churches were able to become united churches many years ago, even before the official establishment of the WCC. These days we are gathered here in the name of the National Council of Churches in India. The goal of visible unity has been raised and addressed with the seriousness it deserves.

Still, the unity of the church is an unfinished agenda, both for you as churches here in India and for the WCC. We know that among the churches in the world in the year 2012,

both here and in other places, there are issues that are still matters of difficulty, differences that are cumbersome to handle, diversity that is confusing, and we hear of potential new divisive issues. We do work for the visible unity shared in the one Eucharist, the one faith, the one fellowship. We also know that the unity given in Christ must be manifested in the way the Church is present in the world. The unity of the Church is not for the sake of the Church only: it is for the world. It must be manifested in new expressions of reconciliation, justice and peace within the Church itself.

Dear sisters and brothers, we learn something very significant from the letter to the Romans about how the Gospel applies to the groaning world. However, we also learn how the Gospel and the groaning world need the fellowship in the Church, a fellowship that is able to give a manifestation in itself of what the Gospel is and what it means to share the Gospel. Groaning from injustice and conflicts is not only heard by the Church, it is also found in the Church, and it is addressed by the Church.

The Gospel makes us accountable to God: It shows us that we all are in need of the grace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel makes us accountable to the world. The Gospel is for the groaning world; we cannot ignore those who are groaning, nor the reasons behind the groaning. More than that: The Gospel makes us accountable to one another: for the sake of one another we have received the gift of hope in Jesus Christ, and it makes us mutually accountable to one another in the fellowship where the gifts of God are to be shared. To be accountable for my gifts is to use them for the benefit of this whole fellowship. To be mutually accountable in this fellowship is also to receive and acknowledge the contributions from the others, to take them and their gifts into my reality.

One consequence of this is that we all follow the will of God as it is given to us in the great commandments. "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8-10). Another consequence is that we leave the judgement to God and do not judge one another (chapter 14). For we are all dependent on our relationship to God our life-giver and redeemer: "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (14:8).

The conclusion of the whole reasoning in the letter to the Romans is therefore about the reciprocity, the mutuality, the "one another" defined by our relationship to Christ. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15:7). Again it is the hope that is created by the fulfilment of the promises through the resurrection, a hope that is just as real for the circumcised as for the gentiles, that is in focus (15:8ff). And this hope, this fellowship, can only be real if it is expressed in something very concrete, a true token of mutual accountability, of sharing collection of money with the Church in Jerusalem.

All this theology was developed to answer a concrete need in the reality of the Church, the need of somebody belonging to the fellowship of grace. The call to be welcoming and sharing in the Church is inseparable from sharing the reality of the groaning world. Therefore, the question of the divided table of the Lord is more than a question for those who have insight into the historical and theological background of those divisions that still are obstacles to a sharing of the Eucharist. The call to share the gifts of God in the Body of Christ is also a call to show that the Gospel is a message of sharing, of Christ sharing in the groaning and suffering of the world, of the church called to share in the hope that change is possible, that redemption can become a reality, that injustices and conflicts shall not have the last word in this world.

On this background, it makes a lot of sense for the World Council of Churches to now unite in the prayer that is chosen for our upcoming 10th Assembly in Busan, Korea, next year:

### **5. God of life, lead us to justice and peace!**

The Gospel in a groaning world becomes a prayer, a sigh of the Holy Spirit. This prayer is not only a word of complaint or of concern. It is not only a word - spoken or unspoken - to tell and make somebody aware of the reality. The prayer, and particularly the common prayer that the Holy Spirit also helps us to pray, is a word that opens us to transcendence and transformation.

Prayer opens us to the empowering and life-giving reality of God. Therefore, we also always pray in the name of the God of life. This is the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who in a full communion of persons expresses the full life of God. The prayer to the God of life is a reference to this Triune God who has created us equally, who has given us the law to order our lives, who makes us accountable for our lives in our relations with one another and with nature. This is the God who identifies with all human life, everywhere and at every time, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This is the God who identifies with all suffering and groaning life. This is the God of the life-giving Spirit, who again and again gives new life.

The fellowship of the Church can only pray to the God of life to lead us, to make us a fellowship that is moving, not standing still, not accepting and complying with reality as it is. We pray to the God of life who helps us hear the cries of the world. We pray to the God of life who changes our fellowship into a fellowship of forgiven sinners, of believers in the new life in Christ, of people who are accountable in terms of how we serve new life in Christ. We pray to the God of life who enables us to become agents for justice and peace, to bear fruits of the kingdom of God, to bring signs of the kingdom to a world that is sighing, longing and groaning for it.

Paul in the letter to the Romans, chapter 8, speaks of a longing for the coming reality of God, where we are released from the realities that make us groan and suffer. The eschatological hope is a hope that can transcend any reality. Therefore, it is the gift of

God to all those who are living in realities that seem not to be changing, experiencing injustice and conflicts that do not seem to come to an end. Hope is what is not seen. "But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Rom 8:25). The hope for another world, for the kingdom of God, can never be an acceptance of the injustice and conflicts of sin and the evil wills of our world. On the contrary, it is a hope that believes that something else will become reality. Any expression of this hope must therefore also be an effort to change reality according to the values of the kingdom of God, not to accept the opposing values. Hope is therefore always a protest, a transforming protest.

The Christian Church is not powerful because of our institutions, our means, our titles, our privileges or anything like that. The Church of Christ is powerful because it carries a hope of new life that is grounded in the reality of Christ bringing new life to the world. The new life of Christ is not a superficial or supernatural life. It is the life of the real touch, given to those who really groan, given by those who have received it as a gift to be shared.

Through the Church and the fellowship of churches we can give a sign of this hope of justice and peace. The world needs this gift. Are we willing to pray and to be led by the God of life in the reality in which we live, for the changes required in us and by us?

Let me end where I started, acknowledging that you know the reality of groaning in this nation, and that you know the obstacles for hearing the Gospel in this reality. Therefore, you are those who can continue my reflection and pray the prayers of the groaning world in your place, the words of transformation of the voice of the Gospel here. You are not alone.

God of life, lead us to justice and peace!