

CONFERENCE ON WORLD MISSION AND EVANGELISM

COME HOLY SPIRIT - HEAL AND RECONCILE

Called in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities

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A LETTER FROM ATHENS TO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES

Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile: Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Greetings from Athens, Greece. We write to you during the holy time between Easter and Pentecost, when the risen Christ prepared his followers for the gift of the Holy Spirit and called them to carry the good news to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), promising to be with them until “the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Here, on the shores of the Aegean Sea, 600 of us have gathered, from 105 countries, hosted by the Church of Greece and other churches in Greece and called together by the World Council of Churches for the 13th international Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, meeting from 9-16 May 2005. And as the sun rose on the conference, a small boat sailed out of the dawn, carrying a huge olive-wood cross: a gift from the churches in Jerusalem, a sign of both suffering and hope, made from the fragments of the trees uprooted during the building of the wall separating Palestinians from Palestinians and from Israelis. We pray that this cross become a sign of reconciliation.

For the first time, this CWME conference has taken place in a predominantly Orthodox context. Young people, though far fewer than planned, have played an important part. For the first time the meeting included a significant number of fully participating delegates from non WCC member churches, that is the Roman Catholic Church and some Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and networks. ‘We’, therefore, are a diverse group, from every corner of the world and many ethnic and cultural backgrounds, speaking many languages, and representing the major Christian traditions. Our theme is a prayer: “Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile”.

This letter is an attempt to share with you some of the week’s insights and challenges, as well as the experiences of joy and pain it has brought us. In these days, we have journeyed together, although we have not always agreed. We are in mission, all of us, because we participate in the mission of God who has sent us into a fragmented and broken world. We are united in the belief that we are “called together in Christ to be reconciling and healing communities”. We have prayed together. We have been particularly helped by readings of Scripture as we struggled, together, to discern where the reconciling, healing Spirit is leading us, in our own contexts, two thousand years after St Paul arrived on these shores carrying the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We want to share that journey with you, and to invite you to make it your own.

We stand now at a particular moment in the history of mission. While the centres of power are still predominantly in the global North, it is in the South and the East that the churches are growing most rapidly, as a result of faithful Christian mission and witness. The missional character of the Church is experienced in greater diversity than ever, as the Christian communities continue the search for distinctive responses to the Gospel. This diversity is challenging, and it can sometimes make us uneasy. Nevertheless, within it we have discovered opportunities for a deepening understanding of the Holy Spirit's creative, life-sustaining, healing and reconciling work. For the power of the Holy Spirit touches us in many ways: in gentleness and truth, comfort and creativity, worship and action, wisdom and innocence, communion and sanctification, liberation and holy contemplation. But there are evil spirits too, active in the world and sadly even in many of our histories and communities. These are spirits of violence, oppression, exclusion, division, corruption, self-seeking, ignorance, failure to live up to our beliefs and of fearful silence in the face of injustice. In discerning the work of the Holy Spirit, we have experienced the need to return constantly to the roots of our faith, confessing the Triune God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh.

In Athens we were deeply aware of the new challenges that come from the need for reconciliation between East and West, North and South, and between Christians and people of other faiths. We have become painfully aware of the mistakes of the past, and pray that we may learn from them. We have become conscious of our own tendency to reinforce barriers by excluding and marginalising on grounds such as race, caste, gender, disability or by tolerating the continuation of oppressive practices within our own societies and our own churches. Halfway through the Decade to Overcome Violence, we realise anew that the call to non-violence and reconciliation stands at the heart of the Gospel message. As a global gathering, we are challenged by the violence inflicted by the forces of economic globalisation, militarism, and by the plight of the marginalised people, especially the indigenous communities and peoples uprooted by migration.

St Paul speaks of the new creation heralded by Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit. "In Christ", he says, "God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Cor. 5:19-20) It is this "new creation" that we hold to be the goal of our missionary endeavour. With Paul, we believe that reconciliation and healing are pivotal to the process by which that goal is to be reached. Reconciliation, as the restoration of right relations with God, is the source of reconciliation with oneself, with other people and with the whole of creation.

But the road to reconciliation and healing is not an easy one. It involves listening, truth-telling, repentance, forgiveness and a sincere commitment to Christ and his justice. For this reason, we have explored a range of ways by which the healing power of God is made available to us. These include the healing that takes place through prayer, ascetical practices and the charisms of healing, through sacraments and healing services, through a combination of medical and spiritual, social and systemic approaches, and through sensing the sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit, even when we accept and continue to struggle with illness and traumas. We celebrated healing services and were moved by the stories of Christian health and counselling professionals and their struggle for more holistic approaches. We were inspired by the stories of people living with HIV and AIDS and were challenged to counter stigma and discrimination and to promote wholeness for those living with HIV and AIDS. We heard testimonies of people healed by the power of the Holy Spirit, as well as those who have not been healed, or have encountered corrupt or exploitative healing practices. We also heard stories of healing in the midst of struggles for social, economic and ecological justice. All true healing comes from God. It includes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing, and it shares the tension of the coming of God's reign as 'already here' and 'yet to come'. We therefore celebrate true healing as a living sign of

God's new creation.

Living in the Holy Spirit, anticipating the reign of God, called to be children of God's new Creation, we have also to acknowledge the troubled and confusing present. It is a source of pain to us to recognize that God's mission is distorted by the divisions and lack of understanding that persists in and among the churches. In our longing for a fuller and more authentic participation in God's mission, we continue to carry the pain of our inability to overcome the barriers that prevent us from celebrating together the most healing and reconciling of sacraments, the Eucharist – the Lord's Supper. The conference theme, therefore, has been a call to a humble acceptance of our own need for healing and reconciliation.

But God calls us to be a community of hope. "Called in Christ to be healing and reconciling communities", we have continued here in Athens the task of defining the kind of community God desires us to become, a community that bears witness to the Gospel in word and deed; that is alive in worship and learning; proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all; that offers young people leadership roles; that opens its doors to strangers and welcomes the marginalised within its own body; that engages with those who suffer, and with those who struggle for justice and peace; that provides services to all who are in need; that recognises its own vulnerability and need for healing; and that is faithful in its commitment to the wider Creation. We pray that the Holy Spirit will breathe healing power into our lives, and that together we may move forward into the blessed peace of the new creation.

In conclusion, we wish to express our deep gratitude to all those who made this conference possible. From the country in which St Paul proclaimed the Gospel of God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ, we pray that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all.

Athens, May 18, 2005

(Signed by Ruth Bottoms, George Mathew Nalunnakkal and Jacques Matthey, officers of CWME)