**Living Together in the Household of God:**

**A Theological Reflection**

**14th GENERAL ASSEMBLY CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA**

**D. T. NILES MEMORIAL LECTURE**

Friday, May 22, 2015, 17.00-18.00

20- 27 May 2015, Jakarta- Indonesia

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1. **Introduction**

On behalf of the World Council of Churches (WCC), I would like to thank the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) for inviting me to give the D T Niles lecture at the 14th General Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia. This is an occasion for us to remind ourselves of the great contribution of DT Niles[[2]](#footnote-2) to the global ecumenical movement and to the process of formation and leadership of the East Asia Conference of Asia (EACC), the predecessor of CCA. It is my great privilege to stand in solidarity with people and churches of Asia whom he served faithfully and to deliver this message in his name.

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to the local hosts- -The Batak Christian Protestant Church (HKBP) and the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI). The warmth, hospitality and love we are experiencing is remarkable. Truly, I am in the Household of God!

I would like to thank my sister Dr Henriette Hutabarat Lebang for her dynamic and servant leadership of CCA for the last five years. She has been a guiding light to the Asian and global ecumenical movement. We are proud of you for being the first woman general secretary of CCA. You are a role model for so many women who aspire to be ecumenical leaders. As an ecumenical leader in Asia, you also found time to serve the World Council of Churches through its executive committee and central committee. I acknowledge your leadership in the World Communion of Reformed Churches globally and the support and encouragement you continue to give to churches here in Indonesia. I wish you great success and the blessing of God for your future ministry as president of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, PGI.

I thank you, my sister, for inviting me as an African woman theologian in particular to address this assembly in the year 2015, in which we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Afro-Asian meeting in Bandung, Indonesia, of the Non-Aligned Countries[[3]](#footnote-3). I thank you very much for this honour.

I would also like to express my heartfelt congratulations to my brother, the incoming General Secretary of CCA, Dr Mathews George Chunnakara. He is a former colleague of mine in Public Witness and Diakonia of the World Council of Churches, where he was the Director of the Commission of Churches on International Affairs. I can affirm that he is a dynamic ecumenical leader, who has steadfastly served the ecumenical movement in a brilliant manner, from the national, regional and international arena. I look forward to working closely with you, as you lead the ecumenical movement from Asia to serve the children of God in this vast, beautiful and diverse region that you know so well.

It is a privilege for me to be part of the group giving some theological insights and foundation on the theme of the assembly "Living Together in the Household of God" for the deliberation of the assembly. My work has been made easy by reflections shared by my Asian colleagues at the WCC.[[4]](#footnote-4) The publication of *Living Together in the Household of God: Challenges to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace in Asia* by your very own, Mathews George Chunnakara[[5]](#footnote-5) is key to theological insights and foundations on the assembly theme. I also wish to acknowledge the work already done at a theological workshop organised by the Christian Conference of Asia at the Jarkarta Theological Seminary in Indonesia on the CCA Assembly theme in 2013. I have seen that the process of reflecting on this theme goes as far back as 2006, when I found the article by Hope S. Antone entitled: ‘Living Together in the Household of God: Becoming a Household of Love, Faith and Hope.’[[6]](#footnote-6) As I engage with scholars from Asia, I come at the theme drawing from the perspectives of African women’s theologians[[7]](#footnote-7)(hereafter the Circle) who are members of the the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. This is because when the Circle was inaugurated in 1989, ecclesiology became a central issue.[[8]](#footnote-8) Therefore since then the Circle conferences focus on theological understanding of what it means to be in the household of God, and publications have come out from such deliberations which I would like to draw from to feed into the discussions at this assembly.

I have therefore divided this presentation into three sections. In the first part I will reflect on the first part of the assembly theme: ‘Living together,’ Second, I reflect on the second part of the theme: the household of God. Finally, I will conclude by submitting that the theological principles of living together in the household of God are an asset in the process of walking together in the pilgrimage of justice and peace.

1. **Living together**

Living together means different things, depending the context in which it is being used. In the theme of the assembly, I want to interpret living together in the context of the ecumenical movement. We need to seek the following questions as we live together: where? With whom? Why? How? I seek to identify three dimensions of living together. First, we live together ecumenically. Second we live together to respond together. Third we live together in love.

1. ***Living together ecumenically***

In the lecture of Rev Dr Samuel Kobia, former general secretary of the WCC, which he delivered at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary on 17 November 2006[[9]](#footnote-9), he described the 20th century as the ecumenical century, when the churches built on work started in the previous century to form ecumenical organizations.

As an ecumenical movement, we are living together on the whole inhabited earth. The whole planet is our common home. This is based on our interpretation of Psalm 24 which says:

“The earth (i.e., the *oikoumene)* is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”  This is where we are living together. Kobia also stated:

In our faith we confess the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as creator, redeemer and sustainer of all life. The ecumenical dimension of our faith compels us to take the risk and to announce God's presence in the world as a whole. We are there to discern and follow God's calling in all dimensions of our life. We need to recognize that we can never be fully church if we are not being church ecumenically. God is not limited to an individual church, nation, gender or race. God's love is at the origins of creation and God's grace is a power that transforms all according to God's will and purpose.

In John 17:21, it is Jesus’ prayer that his followers should be one so that the world may believe in him as the one sent by God. Therefore, being an ecumenical church requires of us to share together our spirituality and to act together. It is these two which make the presence of Jesus Christ visible among us and in our witness in the world credible. It requires from us to discern together the will of God for the church and for the world. Therefore, this week we will spend together here gives us an opportunity to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us together.

1. ***Living together to respond together***

Living together ecumenically allows the churches to respond together to the events happening in the churches and in the world. Kobia went further to define ecumenism in the 21st century as referring to ‘the fellowship of Christian churches working together in the ecumenical movement: the context they encounter, the witness and mission to which Christ is calling them here and now, and the shape their fellowship will take.’ The dimension of responding together means acting together. This action is based on what we have heard God saying to us about the issues in the church or in the world. It is a space for analysis of the state of the church and the society today and the role of the church in the world.

For the Asian churches, the commitment to live together in order to respond to issues from Asia from Asian perspective goes back to 1957, when the EACC was formed. The WCC was present then and has continued to accompany the churches in Asia in a spirit of mutual and shared commitment in our ecumenical journey. As mentioned by the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, the current general secretary of the WCC, in his lecture given at the 13th CCA assembly in 2010,[[10]](#footnote-10) the WCC cannot begin to describe for the churches in Asia what you issues you need to respond to together. You know your context very well. The WCC was happy to hold its 13th General Assembly in Asia as it gave us occasion to magnify the joys and challenges of Asia so that the ecumenical movement can accompany the Asian churches in responding to the key issues in Asia. In this case, living together ecumenically is not just for the Asian churches but the global churches being in solidarity with Asian churches.

1. ***Living together in love***

Living together in love is also a commandment for all the followers of Jesus Christ as stated in John 13:34-35: **“**I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Here we see an explanation of why the followers of Jesus should love one another. In the Gospel according to Luke (10: 27, 28), Jesus agreed fully with the summary of the Commandments as given by the scholar who was testing him. The scholar summarized the Ten Commandments in two, quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ (paraphrased from Deut. 6:5); and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (quoted from Lev. 19:18). The two commandments merge into one when we see 'the other' as a reflection of the divine; as part of the one body we belong to; and when we love the other as ourselves, however remote the part may be from us. - Love the other as ourselves (John 13:34-35).

While the verses quoted above are focusing on love among the fellowship of believers, in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12), Jesus challenges us to break free and step out from our deceptive comfort zones, to empathise with those who are in vulnerable situations and to make ourselves vulnerable. He clearly wants us to respond to realities in a caring and compassionate manner, to be able to yearn for justice and peace and to have the courage to respond, even when our interests and life are at stake. It is this costly discipleship that can make a difference in the world:

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind.' Jesus’ teaching about our seeing God in the most marginalized people (those who hunger, thirst, the stranger who needs accompaniment, the one who needs clothing, protection and care, the sick and the incarcerated—Matt. 25: 31- 46), clearly indicated that our caring for the other is part of our loving our God!

But we should not limit being followers of Christ to our denominational, ethnic, class, regional or national silos. We have to listen to each other’s narratives, challenges and successes. We need to accompany each other in our lives as part of living together. This is the great ecumenical mandate that each of you has. This is why the ecumenical spaces are precious. The Christian Conference of Asia is a God-given instrument and opportunity, for you to witness together as Asian churches!

1. **Household of God**

A household consists of people who live together, sharing dwelling place and food, bound by relationships, values, existential needs and economy. The size of the household varies according to cultures and regions, ranging from nuclear households to whole communities and nations. The second part of the theme for this conference focuses on the household of God. It clearly shows us that living together is to be done in the household of God. The question this raises is: what is our common understanding of the household of God and what are the challenges that come with it? I have chosen to reflect on the household of God in three ways: (a) within my cultural context; (b) in the context of the Old and New Testament; (c) in the context of the challenges faced by the church of God today.

1. ***The household of God: my cultural context***

From my childhood in Malawi, I have happy memories of my parents' household. From an early age, I understood that our household consists of my parents, uncles and aunts, my grandparents, and great grandparents. In our village, we trace our bloodline through the mothers. I am the fourth generation of Christians. Holiday times were the best, when we could all congregate at our great grandmothers’ village. We ate, worked and did everything together as one big community. Despite differences in denominations,[[12]](#footnote-12) we prayed together too. On my father’s side of the family, we learned that part of our household was also Muslim. My grandfather, who was a Presbyterian minister, had a brother who was an imam. There were also others among the members of our family who made a conscious decision to remain in the traditional religion of our ancestors. Our household includes sisters and brothers-in-law, nieces and nephews of Indian and of European descent and of other ethnic groups within Malawi and the African continent. Our household is therefore ecumenical, interreligious and multi-racial and inter cultural. Religion, race and ethnicity are not a dividing factor as it is the bloodline that keeps us united. Within this rich religious heritage, I grew up experiencing warmth and security, companionship and love, the joys of discovery and learning, spiritual and physical nurturing and mentorship. All this contributed to who I am today and influenced my understanding of the household of God and interdenominational Christianity. Despite the fact that I grew up in a country where Christians are the majority,[[13]](#footnote-13) I am sure that my story resonates with most of the experiences of the Christians in Asia, where Christians are the minority. If this is our common experience because of our context, how much of the values of togetherness across ethnic, cultural, racial, denominational, religious lines impact the relations in the churches and in the communities where we come from in Asia?

1. ***The household of God in the context of the Old and New Testament***

The Bible has several ways in which the term *household (s)* is used. Hope Antonne has identified 119 references to the *oikia* for “household” and “households” in the whole Bible.[[14]](#footnote-14) It seems the understanding of household varies from the way it is used in the Old Testament and New Testament. Again drawing from the work of Antonne, ‘in the Old Testament the word ranges in meaning from house or dwelling, to family (and all who live in the house, including slaves and servants), to clan or tribe (meaning a group of households), to an entire nation’. In addition, Mathews George Chunnakara has brought our attention the link between *oikos* and the land of Israel.[[15]](#footnote-15) He also makes the link between the household of God and the command to take care of creation as found the creation story. The prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple is an example of a vision, even within the Old Testament, that the temple of God was to bring all nations together, thereby going beyond the nation of Israel.

Similarly, the New Testament has a variety of meanings for the household. In John 2:16, Jesus uses *oikia* to refer to the Jewish temple as his “Father’s house.” As he was facing his imminent death, he used the “Father’s house” in reference to heaven as abode of God and God’s children (John 14:2).[[16]](#footnote-16) During the period of the early Christians, the household of God referred to the church of Jesus Christ. In particular, in Eph. 2:19 the household of God is where Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians become one in Christ. It says: ‘So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.’ Here we note that it is Jesus Christ who holds the church and its teachings together. 1 Corinthians 6 goes further to link the bodies of Christians with the temple of the Holy Spirit, where the Holy Spirit resides.

1. ***Challenges to the household of God today***

Christ, the head of the household, is the very personification of servant leadership: the master who serves and who washes the feet of his disciples. We are dynamic members of this household. Philip Potter called it the 'house of living stones—a living community of sharing in justice and peace.' While previously the ecumenical movement focused on bringing the churches together to deal with interdenominational issues that hindered the unity of the church, today the landscape has changed. The ecumenical movement is forced to deal with divisions within churches over exclusion and discrimination on the basis of race, caste, gender, HIV and AIDS, and sexual orientation. Mostly it is about moral discernment in the household of God. How do we live together in such a way that no one is made to feel that they are aliens in the household of God?[[17]](#footnote-17) Is one form of discrimination among Christians in the household of God better than another?

Under the leadership of Dr Aruna Gnanadason, the WCC launched a study on “Being Church” at the same time as another on “Overcoming Violence.” Both were responses by the Porto Alegre WCC 9th assembly to the results of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, 1988-1998. Violence against women and questions of women’s participation in the church are divisive issues in the body of Christ. But they have remained important in the ecumenical movement as they still raise issues of justice in the household of God where God is justice. Human trafficking and the brutal rape of women in Asia have not abated, as is the case in other parts of the world. Now, more than ever, there is need for more coordinated effort by the church in Asia to purge this evil from the household of God.

Inequality has no theological or biblical basis, since the suffering of the children of God mars the image of God. Inequality is magnified when people are affected by natural disasters like floods and earthquakes, as we see most recently in the Philippines and Nepal. Then there is the issue of migration, which is putting the lives of people in danger as they travel on seas in unsafe ships. Unfortunately, hospitality is not granted to all who need help, as we see also in the story of the Good Samaritan. Even in the household of God, the tendency is to want to give humanitarian aid to other Christians and not people from other religions. Yet the church is called to raise its prophetic voice to advocate for people suffering from inequality irrespective of their religious affiliation, race or caste, class. As noted above, all are children of God deserving of being reached with God’s love.

As observed above, the household of God includes the whole creation. It has now become clear that the survival of the human race is linked to the way we treat the environment. The head of the household of God is expecting Christians to practice stewardship by taking care of the earth. Most of the ancient religions have long since respected the earth as they see their worship of God in a holistic manner. Unfortunately for the majority, in our practice of Christianity we have failed to see the link between our consumption patterns and the destruction of the earth. The focus on the household of God gives us an opportunity to see this connection and to strive for economic and ecological justice.

Just peace in Asia has been the concern of the ecumenical movement and of the churches in Asia. The past assemblies of the CCA have focused on this theme. The 10th assembly of the WCC, which was held in Busan, South Korea, in 2013, aimed at raising the issue of the reunification of the Korean peninsula and other issues of justice in Japan, Pakistan, and Nepal, just to mention some countries.

1. **The framework of the pilgrimage of justice and peace for living together in the household of God**

One of the key outcomes of the WCC 2013 assembly was an invitation to Christians and people of good will from everywhere to join in a pilgrimage of justice and peace. The assembly theme, ‘God of life, lead us to justice and peace,’ formed a uniting prayer, bringing together the diversity of concerns and expectations into a framework for understanding and commitment *to move forward together* in a pilgrimage of justice and peace. The assembly also identified the following key themes for the pilgrimage: peace building, economic justice, climate change, and social justice informed by spirituality, formation and theological reflection.

I now extend this invitation once more to you to deliberate on how you are going to make this pilgrimage of justice and peace a reality in your context. The key elements to the pilgrimage are: (a) It is spiritual. Therefore it involves identifying the gifts that God has already given the churches in Asia in order to embark on this pilgrimage. (b) It is contextual. It demands you to do an analysis of your context in order to identify areas of brokenness, where God’s people and creation are hurting and where you feel Jesus Christ is calling you to respond. At the same time, it brings you into contact with global issues of brokenness. It is in line with what you are already doing here. (c) It is transformational. You are called to bring healing, reconciliation, and peace with justice to the brokenness you have identified. In 2015 the ecumenical movement is focusing on climate change. Churches are gathering in different stations to reflect and pray together as they move to the UN Conference of Parties (COP21), which will take place in the Le Bourget area of Paris on 7-8 December 2015. Subject to the approval of the WCC’s executive committee, 2016 pilgrimage of justice and peace will focus on just peace in Israel/Palestine.

How are the churches in Asia accompanying this pilgrimage of justice and peace? Whatever ways you decide to be involved in the pilgrimage, the ecumenical movement would like to be informed about your stories, so that we can accompany one another in the pilgrimage of justice and peace. The WCC has launched an internet site, a blog and a Facebook page in support of it. I invite you to be part of the social media interaction on the pilgrimage of justice and peace.

May the God of life lead us to justice and peace. Amen.

1. Prof. Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri is former Professor of African Theology, Dean and Head of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, former Moderator of the WCC Commission on Ecumenical Formation and Theological education; former General Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Newbigin Lesslie, Niles, Daniel Thambyrahah in *Dictionary of Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd edition, Editors: Lossky Nicholas, Bonino Jose Miguez, Pobee John, Stransky Tom F., Wainwright, Geoffrey, Webb, Pauline. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002, pages 827-828. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The first large-scale Asian–African or Afro–Asian Conference—also known as the Bandung Conference (Indonesian: *Konferensi Asia-Afrika*) —was a meeting of Asian and African states, most of which were newly independent, which took place on April 18–24, 1955 in [Bandung](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bandung), [Indonesia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indonesia). The conference's stated aims were to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose [colonialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism) or [neocolonialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neocolonialism) by any nation. The conference was an important step toward the [Non-Aligned Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-Aligned_Movement). See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bandung_Conference> cited on 15/05/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I acknowledge contributions of the following WCC staff from Asia: Rev Dr Peniel Rajkumar, Rev Dr Ester Widiasih and Dr Manoj Kurian. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mathews George Chunnakara 2015 *Living Together In The Household Of God: Challenges To The Pilgrimage Of Justice And Peace In Asia.* Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Antone, Hope S. ‘Living Together In the Household of God: Becoming a Household of Love, Faith and Hope. CTC Bulletin, Vol XX11, No 2, August 2006, pages 52-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kanyoro, Musimbi R. A., and Nyambura J. Njoroge. eds. 1996. *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the* *Household of God.* Nairobi: Acton. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. 2005. Ecclesiology in African Women’s Perspective. Pages 146-156 in *On Being* *Church: African Women’s Voices and Visions.* Edited by Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar. Geneva: WCC Publications. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ecumenism in the 21st century: Common witness in a globalized, but deeply divided world , Lecture at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, 17 November 2006, by Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia, general secretary
World Council of Churches <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/speeches/ecumenism-in-the-21st-century> accessed on 17052015  [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Called to Prophesy, Reconcile and Heal: An Ecumenical Perspective,” Thematic Address, by Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary , World Council of Churches Christian Conference of Asia, 13th General Assembly, 15 – 20 April 2010, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Among my relatives, we have those who are: Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostals, Classical African Indigenous Churches and Baptists. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. According to the 2008 population and housing census, there were about 13 million people in Malawi, of whom about 83 percent were Christians, 13 percent were Muslims, 2 percent belonged to other religions, and 2 percent did not belong to any religion at all. Population and Housing Census 2008, Main report, Zomba: National Statistics Office (September 2009), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Antonne Hope, 2006, page 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Chunnakara Mathews George, 2015, page 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Antonne Hope, 2006 page 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Germond, Paul and De Gruchy, Steve, *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa.* New Africa Books, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)