**“Where does the ecumenical movement stand today and where should the WCC take in it in the future?”**

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Dear colleagues and friends, sisters and brothers in Christ.

“And yet it moves” – I would like to quote this phrase, attributed to the astronomer Galileo Galilei, in response to your two questions and to say:

* Where does the ecumenical movement *stand* today? I trust it *moves*. I see more and more churches and people taking up the invitation of the 2013 10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan to participate in a Piligrimage of Justice and Peace and to engage in transformative action. I hear Pope Francis speaking of the church on the way in many of his speeches and texts, and we agreed that the motto of his visit to Geneva last year in June would be: “Walking, praying and working together, an ecumenical pilgrimage!”
* Where is the place the WCC should take in the ecumenical movement in the future? Not at the centre of the world, as the Inquistion wanted to see earth and church against Galilieo Galilei’s better knowledge, but as an actor in a polycentric ecumenical movement, a horizontal network of churches, ecumenical organizations, and groups, with the WCC taking responsibility to convene churches and other actors in the ecumenical movement and to strengthen their common vision and cooperation in their witness to the world in the name of Christ’s love. Appropriately, “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity” is the theme of the next WCC assembly 2021 in Karlsruhe, Germany.

There is an older generation that believes that the ecumenical movement belongs more or less to the 20th century, a spent force from a bye-gone era – no more relevant in the digital age of a globalized world. But to the contrary, monitoring the traffic on our website and the use of our social media channels, we see continuously growing interest. There are obviously also many young people from all continents of the world. They not only want to know what the WCC is doing, for instance, on the climate emergency; they want to take part in the process and share the message with their own means.

My answer to both of the questions, therefore, is an emphatic affirmation of the vital character and crucial contribution of ecumenical Christianity today and the necessary role that the WCC is playing in it. I believe that the movement, essentially a vibrant renewal movement of the churches for the sake of the kingdom, has never been more relevant.

Given the unprecedented peril in which the world finds itself, the evolution of ecumenism toward a unity in praxis of churches together on the way is natural and, in fact, a measure of the movement’s accountability to the world and to God.

Looking at the matter institutionally, theologically, programmatically, and existentially, I find this an exciting time for the ecumenical movement—one of both promise and peril. Let’s focus here on the promise!

**Ecumenism Institutionally**

The World Council of Churches, the premier vehicle of the movement, is organizationally healthy, the fellowship of 350 member churches and partners is strongly woven together, and the mandate to journey with the marginalized toward the reign of God is clear.

Further, we are finding improved and promising relationships with the Roman Catholic Church and with evangelical and Pentecostal churches. This will be evidenced even more in our upcoming 11th Assembly, to be held in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2021.

Further, we presently have strong, effective alliances with agencies of development, disaster relief, healthcare delivery, that undertake both action and advocacy on behalf of those in need.[[1]](#endnote-1) These relations have been rebalanced such that churches and individuals and local congregations do not need to leave all the heavy lifting to professional agencies but also engage directly with and for those very different than themselves.

**Ecumenism Theologically**

The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, now in its sixth year, is not just a strategic direction for the organization since the 10th assembly of the WCC in 2013, but also a description of the whole worldwide ecumenical movement. As churches and as a fellowship of churches, we self-consciously frame our life and work as a sacred journey, a journey of faith toward God’s reign of justice and peace.

Theologically, ecumenism is a renewal movement of the churches and within the churches, propelling us to transcend boundaries and find unity in shared community *(koinonia),* witness *(marturia),* and service *(diakonia).* On our pilgrimage we can also draw on a growing convergence of key generative concepts in ecumenical ecclesiology, mission and evangelism, and *diakonia* or Christian service.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The vision of the pilgrimage of justice and peace implies a distinctive form of discipleship: Rooted in the very being and mission of God, animated by the Spirit, we (as Christians and Christian churches) are united and enabled by our shared identity in the person of Jesus and compelled by the imperatives of the gospel to serve one humanity and our home, the earth. This dynamic vision has also encouraged a globally oriented, open-minded, committed spirituality of justice and peace that in turn enlivens the movement.[[3]](#endnote-3)

**Ecumenism Programmatically**

Given the myriad of issues and needs in today’s world, we have devoted considerable reflection, within the WCC, the Global Christian Forum and in cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church, to pinpointing those sites of hurt and hope where we can be, as churches and ecumenical agencies, effective catalysts and facilitators of religiously motivated change.

The pilgrimage has led to more intense and concrete engagement of and with the churches and partners in issues of children’s rights and protections, global health and healing, gender justice, climate and economic justice, migrants and stateless, peacemaking in violent venues, and combatting racism and xenophobia at their roots.

Direct involvement in peacemaking has also intensified ecumenical engagement in international affairs, working with the UN, and interreligious collaboration to combat religious extremism and excesses of the market.

The ecumenical movement, in other words, is not a single, static programme or organization but a true fellowship of churches and a lively network of partnerships in which disciples come together across confessional and regional and generational divides to tackle our most pressing issues.[[4]](#endnote-4)

**Ecumenism Fundamentally**

Here we arrive at the heart of the question: what is ecumenism spiritually or existentially? Usually born of personal, existential encounters and friendship with others quite different from ourselves,[[5]](#endnote-5) ecumenism is really the dynamic, counter-inertial, renewing force of Christian love.[[6]](#endnote-6) We find it incarnate in the gospel. It compels us as disciples of Jesus always and everywhere to open ourselves empathically and to place ourselves at the service of others.

Conversely, in the critical side, we may think of ecumenical Christianity as an authentic alternative and counter-witness to consumerist Christianity, to merely therapeutic Christianity, the prosperity gospel, xenophobic or racist Christianity, and nationalist forms of Christianity.

Called to reconciliation and unity in one fellowship, holding each other mutually accountable means that we not only acknowledge and respect diversity and difference among the churches but we also challenge each other to live up to the gospel values we espouse, in, for example, churches’ commitments to children, gender justice, and treatment of migrants and refugees.

In other words, ecumenism is the perennial self-critical, renewing impulse in Christian commitment. While the tradition has emphasized the churches’ role as a teaching institution, we today strongly affirm that the church must also be a learning community, learning from each other and those we serve, especially on the margins. Ecumenism is therefore God’s Spirit actively at work in us, as persons and communities of faith, continually converting us to new openness and authenticity.[[7]](#endnote-7) It will demand yet also enable us to transcend the narrow boundaries and parochialisms of our self-interest, of race or class or even of confession or creed.

I believe that wherever Christ’s pilgrim people and communities of faith are willing to test those boundaries and divisions of our world in the name of the authentic gospel, ecumenism lives, indeed thrives.

As it leads us to discover and affirm the essential *humanum* in everyone, ecumenism leads us to think the best of each other, to nurture community instead of competition, to choose solidarity over egotism. It leads us to model consensus over confrontation, choosing creative collaboration over stubborn insistence on tradition or prideful acquiesence in the status quo.

So ecumenism has much to offer an imperiled world today: a deeply grounded, energetic love that is also critically conscious and fully accountable and models a creative collaboration that the world so desperately needs.

As ecumenical Christians and churches in fellowship, we take our stand on creative, constructive Christian hope, and we work ecumenically—with eager hearts, open arms, and willing hands—to heal a world rent by division, distortion, and prejudice through dedication to telling truth, serving justice, and making peace. May God continue to make it more than an “ecumenism” to be discussed, but a real ecumenical movement.

1. Including those of the United Nations, most especially UNAIDS and WHO, the ILO, UNICEF, UNHCR, and the Human Rights Council. The programmatic endeavours of the WCC are closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ecumenical theological self-understanding displays a real convergence in recent work (1) from Faith & Order as outlined in *Come and See* and as formulated in *The Church (koinonia)* and *Moral Discernment* (shared spaces of dialogue), (2) from Mission & Evangelism, as seen in *Together towards Life* (mission from the margins, *missio Spiritus,* transformative discipleship, fullness of life)*,* and (3) from the still-continuing work of rethinking *diakonia,* with both biblical-theological insights as well as practical ones. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, *Hallelujah! Resources for Prayer and Praise* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013); *Hosanna! Ecumenical Songs for Justice and Peace,* ed. Andrew Donaldson (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016); and the many Bible studies from the 10th Assembly (2013), the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (Arusha, 2018), and the annual Lenten Bible studies on oikoumene.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Witness, for example, the work of the churches leading up to COP21 and the Paris Accord. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Keith Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic: Living in More than One Place at Once* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. On ecumenism as a movement of love, see my reflections in “Freedom, Love and Justice (15 January 2019) at: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/speeches/freedom-love-and-justice>; and “The Ecumenical Movement of Love” (15 June 2018) at: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2018/report-of-the-general-secretary-the-ecumenical-movement-of-love> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See my *The Truth We Owe Each Other: Mutual Accountability in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)