

*Christian Solidarity
in the Cross of Christ*

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World Council
of Churches
Publications

CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY IN THE CROSS OF CHRIST

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Cover design: 4 Seasons Book Design/Michelle Cook

Cover image: Sadao Watanabe, *Oikoumene*, 1991

Author photo: Mark Beach

Book design and typesetting: 4 Seasons Book Design/Michelle Cook

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1568-9

World Council of Churches
150 route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
<http://publications.oikoumene.org>

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Preface

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Cor. 2:2)

In the early years of the World Council of Churches, the council and the broader ecumenical movement adopted as their symbol a simple boat upon the waves, with the cross as its mast. The Greek word *oikoumene*—“the whole inhabited earth”—from which the term *ecumenical* originates, encircles the craft and indicates its trajectory. This image is a reminder of the fishing boats of Jesus’ early disciples, the sailing ships that carried apostles, the ability of Jesus to still the storm at sea.

Over time, the design of this drawing has been adapted through use by many organizations and conferences. (A beautiful rendition by Sadao Watanabe graces the cover of this volume.) Yet essential elements have remained the same.

There are churches along the coast of my native Norway in which one finds model ships hanging from the ceiling. These vessels are the gift of local sailors, reminding Christians that the church can carry us safely through stormy waters, from continent to continent and island to island, and bring us at last to harbour.

In the case of the ecumenical ship, we see that the cross stands at the centre. The sailors and their passengers do not

set forth as crusaders, conquerors or colonizers, but as ambassadors of good news and of the love God gives to unite the world's people. We travel in order to show solidarity in the spirit of Jesus Christ who lived as one of us, and suffered as we suffer, and triumphed over death.

As general secretary of the World Council of Churches, I am privileged to journey to many places and to meet members of many churches, catching glimpses of their lives while experiencing anew the vibrant life of God's wonderful creation that manifests itself in rich diversity.

Solidarity in the Cross of Jesus Christ

In the spring of 2011, I visited the churches and people of Cuba. Standing on the coastline one day, looking out to sea, I thought of Europeans who came this way, centuries ago, and who used the cross as a symbol of their conquest of the Caribbean. I was encouraged to see that today the cross has recovered its meaning as a sign of liberation and solidarity. The witness of the churches, in Cuba and elsewhere, is a sign of true faith in the cross of Christ.

The cross too often has been seen as a fixed boundary: the instrument of execution, a cruel means to end one person's life. But in Jesus Christ, the cross becomes a signpost pointing the way to a common future, a blessing rather than a curse, the mast of a ship enabling unimagined progress, not in taking land but in our pilgrimage toward hope, faithfulness and unity.

The apostle Paul, no stranger to the connecting routes of the sea, reminded the church at Corinth that the heart of his proclamation was found in "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Saint Paul did not wish to be remembered for his lofty words or personal preferences or suggestions of the superiority of some as compared to others. Jesus Christ and his

crucifixion provide the proper perspective for anything else we may be, do or say about God, the church, our times, ourselves.

The message of the empty cross, and the empty tomb on Easter morning, is that God remains with us and for us. Jesus Christ, the God of life, has experienced the reality of death. The God of righteousness has experienced the consequences of sin, injustice and senselessness. Expressing the ultimate solidarity with humanity, the Son of God and Prince of Peace experienced the sort of broken relations that rip our world apart. The cross reminds us that God knows the ugliness and deadly effects of human sin both in their subtlety and their utmost cruelty.

The meaning of the cross is profound and belongs to the mysteries of faith. The cross shows us how destructive sin can be, how it encourages injustice and destroys our attempts to build peace. Sin and injustice must be neither tolerated nor ignored.

The cross teaches us that the Triune God still identifies with creation and shows us visions of a renewed creation in which the ravages of sin are no more. This is good news, first for this world's victims but also for all sinners. In the words of John the Baptist: Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!

Christian Solidarity in and for the World

The idea of a God who suffers is strange to our ears. But the perspective of the cross allows us to see that God suffers as a result of human sin. It also reveals to us that God creates new life by means of this suffering. Although it has figured prominently on crusaders' banners and military emblems, the cross is not given to us for the legitimization of war and conquest. The cross calls us to our knees in humility, self-criticism

and confession of our sinfulness. And the cross empowers us to embrace life anew.

The cross belongs to both the land and the sea, as to all places in God's creation. It reminds us of our overuse and abuse of nature, of how people suffer today as a consequence of exploitation. The mast of a ship may call to mind a cross, but so too do devotional crosses that have been erected by believers on hilltops in such countries as Norway and Switzerland, and on mountain peaks from the Andes to the Ethiopian Highlands to the Himalayas. On land and sea, we find reminders of God's love and solidarity with everyone and everything in creation.

We, as disciples of Jesus Christ, are guided by the Holy Spirit into solidarity with the people of God and with all of creation so that the power of the cross may be evident in our life together.

I began my term as general secretary of the World Council of Churches with a sermon on "The Ecumenical Movement of the Cross." In it, and in the other presentations from a variety of contemporary contexts that are reproduced in this small book, I have examined various facets of the meaning of solidarity beneath the cross of Christ. These chapters represent a sort of ship's log, charting progress in the ongoing voyage of the ecumenical boat. I thank my colleagues who have been bringing questions, ideas, and pieces of text to me—so that we could discuss the map and the sea and the route between the continents together. However, all these words I have made my own and I present them as such.

Part One

God of Life

Chapter 1

The God of Life and the Ecumenical Movement of Creation

God of life, lead us to justice and peace.

*God of life! God is creating life by creating light,
and by bringing order — separating light from
darkness, day from night.*

*God wills life and order, by creating life, new life,
every day, every year.*

*God is inviting you and me to be part of this move-
ment of creation, of the new creation, every day,
every year.*

God is the God of the life-giving word. The first verses of the book called Genesis, the beginning, are about the power to create light and order in darkness and chaos — by words!

“God of Life” — This is also the first part of the theme for the 10th Assembly of the WCC in 2013. The ecumenical movement is in a special way shaped by faith in God, the creator — God of life. Therefore, it is a special gift to us from God that we can start this year by listening to the words of creation, the words about creation, the creative words.

At the beginning of this year, God is inviting you and me to participate in the formulation and use of words of creation, words giving life, to communicate light and order in darkness and chaos.

God is the God of the Spirit, the omnipresent Spirit, able to be present everywhere, present even in all kinds of chaos. The breath of God is giving life in our entire world, every day, every year. The Spirit of God is moving the whole world, the *oikoumene*, and therefore also the churches, which are us, the women and men in the churches.

The first thing to be said about this world, about life, is to be said about God, the God of life: God the will of life, God the word of life, God the Spirit of life. In this trinity of the God of life, everything is potentially present.

Focused on Genesis 1:1-5, this chapter is developed from a sermon at the Chapel of the Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, 9 January 2012.

The Creative Word—Human and Divine

This wonderful poem about the beginning, which we find in the first chapters of the Bible, where no human beings were present, is, however, a text that involves us most profoundly in relation to everything that is. Even before the verses about the creation of human beings as male and female, we are involved in the text by the reflection on how creation has to do with a will, a breath, a word. The whole of creation is seen as a result of relations, of communication, of God willing something new, being present through the Spirit, acting through the Word.

Recently we observed the one-hundredth anniversary of the African National Congress (ANC). The movement started in

— *The whole of creation is seen as a result of relations, of communication, of God willing something new, being present through the Spirit, acting through the Word.* —

a church in South Africa and became the leading party in the process to overcome apartheid. On a news show recently, I saw a film from the 1920s with people carrying their posters in demonstrations. One

of them had the text: “Freedom in our time.” Probably none of them lived long enough to experience this freedom with apartheid falling and the first black president of South Africa elected. The dream, through the definition of what was needed, was absolutely necessary to start the process, the creative process, the process of bringing the order of justice and peace. The dream had to be followed by realistic words, by protests, by tough decisions, by sacrifices, by actions that were very difficult to pursue. The “yes” had to be followed by several instances of “no.” The ecumenical movement has in a very special way been shaped by this process of fighting racism. The Programme

to Combat Racism has given identity to this movement as a movement of creation, honouring God's creation, affirming the equal dignity and rights of every human being, bringing light in darkness and order in injustice and disorder, and uniting the churches—bringing together dreams and hard work.

All creation starts with a dream. As a Norwegian poet has written:

*This is the Dream
This is the dream we carry through the world;
that something fantastic will happen,
that it has to happen...¹*

The poet behind these words was taking care of a small farm and an orchard, just like my grandmother, a widow living in the next village. He struggled with bouts of depression, spending periods in institutions for patients with psychiatric problems. The dream is often born in darkness but meant for the light. The words of creation need both the dream and the realism to be creative, to bring real light.

Our words, our daily use of words, used in worship or in discussions, in the chapel or in the cafeteria, in publications or in small talks, are all means of communication that can become means of creation. They can become the words creating and bringing light, even as—or just as—they are spoken in darkness, or they can be the words bringing darkness. They can be words building up, or tearing down. They can be the words of salt, or only the words of empty sweetness. They can be the words of empowering comfort, or the words of destructive denial or ignorance of one another's contributions and work. Words can be difficult but still necessary to make changes. Our words are not perfect. That is the challenge for

all of us. Still, our words should speak both of dreams as well as reality—to be creating and creative.

Where Are We Going?

But, isn't it too simple, even perhaps disrespectful, to talk about *our* words when we start our year reflecting on the powerful words and the omnipresent Spirit of the God of life?

Texts like the one from the Book of Genesis, the book of beginning, do themselves create humility, respect, a deeper understanding, a stronger love for everything created, and a new will to order our lives for the purpose of life. The text is not neutral, it includes us, and it does not leave us merely as outside spectators. The words help us to take the very important steps of seeing, understanding, and acting. Creation is something we are called to be part of—through our stewardship and protection. Our relations to God, to creation, and to other human beings are shaped by words like these. The text even gives the rhythm of a week as a pattern for human life in need of work and of rest.

We are drawn into the good news, into the gospel of creation: Life is a gift of light, a gift from God. This is the most mysterious and still the most real dimension of everything: Life is given to us, in the secret darkness of my and your mother. And life can only be received as a gift—a gift to be given—to others, for others.

The ecumenical movement is the movement of creation. We are participating in a movement that is called to bring the churches to a fellowship in which they see their common role in participating in the wholeness of God's work. It is a movement with great ambitions: Not only to be church together but to improve the churches' witness in the world, to change the world according to the creation of God.

“Man’s Disorder and God’s Design” — the theme of the First Assembly of the WCC, Amsterdam 1948 — clearly shows how the actors in this movement always have understood the unity of the church as belonging to the wholeness of life given to us by God the creator of life. The allusions to the first verses and chapters of Genesis in this first theme of the Assemblies of the WCC empower us still today, when we now plan and look forward to the 10th Assembly in Korea next year.

In the story of creation, the light was called forward in darkness but, quite remarkably, without removing darkness, bringing order. Even darkness

was brought into the order of creation. In all creation, there is darkness and a shifting between light and darkness. In all creative activity there is a moment of giving life, even to the extent of death, for others. The law of life is the law of the seed. Something has to be given to give life. Therefore, the ecumenical movement of creation will always also be the ecumenical movement of the cross.

In practical terms, through our work and our words, in our relations and our institutions, with our skills and our capacities, we pray: God of life, lead us to justice and peace! Every day... Every year. Amen.

— *The law of life is the law of the seed. Something has to be given to give life. Therefore, the ecumenical movement of creation will always also be the ecumenical movement of the cross.* —