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**And Yet It Moves:
Dream and Reality of the Ecumenical Movement
Reflections on the WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe**

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Abstract:

This paper reflects on the 2022 global assembly of the World Council of Churches, the most comprehensive platform and fellowship bringing together 352 member churches from more than 110 countries, representing around 500 million members worldwide in orthodox, protestant, Anglican and many other denominations. The assembly was held in Karlsruhe from 30 August to 8 September 2022 and can be seen as a landmark event for the relevance of religious communities for issues of peace, justice and sustainable development and thus is a key example for the vitality of the religion and development discourse. Despite heavy conflicts and tensions, underlined by the Russian invasion into Ukraine, the global climate crisis, the conflict in the Middle East, grave violations of human rights by autocratic regimes and historic wounds of racism and discrimination, the assembly managed to articulate a distinct voice in key areas of ecumenical social, political and ecological ethics. This paper describes some of the crucial thematic fields of this extraordinary meeting, while also formulating some critical observations concerning shortcomings and dilemmata that were faced during this assembly.

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And Yet It Moves: Dream and Reality of the Ecumenical Movement

Karlsruhe as a global landmark event and truly ecumenical assembly

The 2022 assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Karlsruhe was a historic event, not so much because it was the first *international* church convention of this size and importance to have met in Germany¹, but more so as it was a significant *ecumenical* gathering in the midst of a grave global crisis, in which a foretaste of the unity of the body of Christ could be sensed despite all the shortcomings and visible tensions and conflicts between nations, churches and confessional families in the European continent and much beyond.

I felt reminded by the famous statement of the Life and Work conference in Oxford 1937 on Church, Community and State which met in similar historical circumstances, wrestling with the powers of the nation-state and excessive religious nationalism in that period, which led to the Second World War. Oxford had made an important distinction between the terms “international” and “ecumenical”:

*The term “international” necessarily accepts the division of humankind into separate nations as a natural if not final state of affairs. The term “ecumenical” refers to the expression within history of the given unity of the church. The one starts from the fact of division and the other from the fact of unity in Christ. The thought and action of the church are international in so far as the church must operate in a world in which the historical bodies share with the rest of humankind the division into national and racial groups. They are ecumenical in so far as they attempt to realize the una sancta, the fellowship who acknowledged the one Lord.*²

Although hindered by many difficult factors (not the least of which consisting of the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine) and delayed by more than a year by a severe global pandemic which made the coming together fairly unlikely even until a few months prior to the event, and put at risk by limited staff and financial resources of WCC while also having to suffer from a negative press campaign from some German media prior to the assembly, accusing the WCC of being simultaneously anti-Semitic as well as belittling Putin³ – despite all of this, the assembly has managed to take place and to be completed

¹ Two assemblies of the WCC had met in Europe: Amsterdam 1948 and Uppsala 1968, but none so far in Germany. Although the directly hosting churches were related to EKD and the Council of Churches in Germany (ACK), a committed model of shared responsibilities for welcoming and hosting guests were developed by the general hosting committee (Gastausschuss), in which the French and the Swiss churches also played a major role. Hosting the assembly also provided German Protestantism an opportunity to express its gratitude for decades of mutual collaboration and acceptance in the global ecumenical movement after the Second World War. See: Konrad Raiser: “The German Protestant Churches and the World Council of Churches”, in: *Ec Rev* 74.2. April 2022, 197–214.

² Quoted from Oxford Conference Life and Work 1937 in: Julio de Santa Ana: “Research and Ecumenical Formation”, *Ecumenical Review*, October 1996, 498, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1996.tb02963.x>. It was the critical stance over against religious nationalism from Oxford 1937, which became the cornerstone of ecumenism in the Amsterdam assembly in 1948. Amsterdam declared ecumenism as a counterforce over against aggressive and imperial nationalism, a lesson which also marked the spirit of Karlsruhe again. Amsterdam in its message had declared: “We bless God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gathers together in one the children of God that are scattered abroad. He has brought us here together at Amsterdam. We are one in acknowledging Him as our God and Saviour. We are divided from one another not only in matters of faith, order and tradition, but also by pride of nation, class and race. But Christ has made us His own, and He is not divided. In seeking Him we find one another.” Cited in: <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/1st-WCC-Assembly-message.pdf>.

³ Article in *Die Welt* by Matthias Hamman, published a day ahead of the assembly (30.8.2022), but with firm preconceived condemnations of the whole of the assembly: “Kirchentreffen in Karlsruhe. Wenn Christen Israel anfeinden und Putin schonen”,

successfully. And all delegations, including even the Russian Orthodox delegation, stayed until the very end. This is not to be taken for granted and can be regarded as success. It is the positive result among others of the plea of Interim General Secretary Ioan Sauca prior to the assembly – despite heavy pressures – not to expel the Russian Orthodox Church, but instead also to invite a small delegation of churches from the Ukraine (although not yet a member church) based on the key conviction that “the WCC is a free space for dialogue, and we come together not because we agree with one another but because we disagree.”⁴ Karlsruhe has shown that the ecumenical movement still is alive and can bring in and contribute its enormous potential even in the midst of a world being at the brink of a new East–West divide, facing a substantial weakening of multilateralism and even the threat of nuclear war. Against the accusation or the suspected diagnosis articulated against the WCC several months before that the “death of ecumenism” has to be announced,⁵ Karlsruhe has shown in several important thematic fields (e.g. Middle East, human sexuality, peace ethics, nationalism) and in the deep commitment and spiritual life of its participants, that the ecumenical movement is as vital, vibrant and supported by as many as almost never before and presents itself as a countercultural force over against exuberant and rigid nationalisms.⁶ In a time when global democratic standards are in recession and autocratic regimes are on the increase, the ecumenical assembly underlined that staying together in honest mutual listening, sincere dialogue and in applying the principles of consensual decision making⁷ is still possible in a global event and platform such as a gathering of churches. Karlsruhe articulated the conviction: There is no alternative to ecumenism and its transnational orientation towards the common good of humanity and of all creation. However, Karlsruhe also made clear that

*one of the most serious challenges facing the ecumenical movement today is to deal with tensions and divisions “within” the same family of churches, instead of “between” families of churches. There is a serious, I would say fundamental, methodological difference, between initiating and encouraging a dialogue of divided church families (what the ecumenical movement was called to do) and churches who are of the same family (what the ecumenical movement is facing today in several cases).*⁸

It is not by coincidence that the title of my own reflection on Karlsruhe thus comes from Ernst Lange and his early book “And Yet it Moves – Dreams and Reality of the Ecumenical Movement” (1986)⁹, which was the most fascinating, motivating and influential introductory book on the ecumenical movement which I have ever read. The assembly in Karlsruhe underlines Ernst Lange’s conviction: Either the future of the church will be ecumenical or it will not have a future at all. The ecumenical movement for him was of interest “as the most massive inner-Christian protest against a Christendom, which in a power alliance with the ruling elites has turned into quite the opposite of what it was at its beginning.”¹⁰ What he has done theologically in 1985 by putting the search, vision and longing for the unity of the church into the

<https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article240766471/Kirchentreffen-in-Karlsruhe-Wenn-Christen-Israel-anfeinden-und-Putin-schon.html>.

⁴ See <https://religionnews.com/2022/09/09/world-council-of-churches-assembly-painted-by-debate-over-russian-invasion/>.

⁵ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/fr-ioan-sauca-god-is-on-the-side-of-those-who-are-suffering>.

⁶ Dr. Agnes Abuom, Moderator of outgoing Central Committee had stated: “the Assembly is a spiritual celebration of the power of God’s love to renew our minds and hearts so that we may become a countercultural force driven by solidarity with the most vulnerable people and God’s creation.”

⁷ The consensus decision making model moves beyond leaving behind losers and winners in a debate, see: <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/consensus-a-colourful-farewell-to-majority-rule>.

⁸ Ioan Sauca in an interview, 14 April 2022, see: <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/fr-ioan-sauca-god-is-on-the-side-of-those-who-are-suffering>.

⁹ Ernst Lange, *Die ökumenische Utopie oder Was bewegt die ökumenische Bewegung?* München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986.

¹⁰ Ernst Lange, *Die ökumenische Utopie oder Was bewegt die ökumenische Bewegung?*, p. 9. München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986. Translation by the author.

context and framework of the secular struggles for solidarity and against dividing barriers in this world was aptly made manifest and richly illustrated by the dynamics of the Karlsruhe assembly: Both the immense potentials of the churches for common action for peace, for ecological transformation and for human rights work as well as the shortcomings, the ongoing tensions and conflicts within the church, which reflect the dramatically fragmented world torn apart by the forces of war, of racism and of grave injustices were appearing openly and thus made visible during this assembly.

4,000 participants, around 700 delegates, 352 member churches, six major assembly working commissions, eleven working sessions of the committees in just five days, ten thematic and business plenaries in a short time span, around at least 60 presentations in the networking zone inside the congress center and 250 side events in places of encounters all around Karlsruhe – this was an overwhelming and often over-demanding superlative of intercultural encounters, dialogues and key decisions, which might seem insignificant in terms of the numbers of people reached directly, but indeed was highly significant as bearing the spirit of hope, of a global longing for peace and of an amazing power of resilience in so many churches practicing democratic standards and recognition of human dignity which so many of their governments have left behind already. The very fact that Karlsruhe was chosen as a venue for this assembly was not only due to its role as cultural and political bridge-builder in the triangular relationships between France, Germany and Switzerland in the South-West of Germany, or due to the historical fact that 1821 Karlsruhe enabled the first comprehensive church union between Reformed and Lutheran churches, thereby providing an inspiring model of Christian unity. It was even more so by the fact that this city hosts the most important institution (cor-)relating religion and law, faith and jurisprudence, the Federal Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht) of the German state.¹¹ This institution is the visible embodiment of the ecumenical conviction (prepared as well already by the Oxford conference 1937) that only a reflected and deliberate self-limitation of the powers of both state and church, a mutual recognition, proper partnership and dialogue at eye-level between religious communities and the state can be a proper safeguard against both temptations which continue until today, i.e. a state intrusion into religious communities or political instrumentalization of religion as well as on the other hand a dominant role or superiority claim of one religion over against state authorities. This is a crucial insight which allowed for a proper free space and legal framework for an assembly to take place in this context and which still has far-reaching consequences for many other countries in which the development of a legal and constitutional framework for the interrelation between state and religion is far less developed than in Germany.¹² The very fact that so many positions and both theological as well as divergent political positions could be freely articulated in the protected space of the Karlsruhe assembly, guaranteed by legal rights of freedom of religion and belief as supported by the state government in its partnership with Christian churches in this country is a result of this convincing

¹¹ See on history: https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/EN/Das-Gericht/Geschichte-des-Bundesverfassungsgerichts/geschichte-des-bundesverfassungsgerichts_node.html; see on state and religion in Germany: <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/state-and-religion-in-germany-the-five-most-important-facts>; also: <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2017/12/the-relationship-between-church-and-state-in-germany/>.

¹² The relevance of a proper development and international learning on models of proper constitutional religious law (Religionsverfassungsrecht) could have been made even more visible during the assembly, although EC 15 on issues of discrimination against religious minorities and the role of FORB dealt with these issues. Annette Kurschus, presiding bishop of EKD in her remarkable greeting words at the beginning of the assembly highlighted the relevance of the German constitution, the emphasis of the constitution on the essential dignity of each human being and the work of the Bundesverfassungsgericht: <https://www.ekd.de/kurschus-begruesst-weltweite-christenheit-in-deutschland-74837.htm>; the Bundesverfassungsgericht also recently published a legal decision of far-reaching importance for climate and intergenerational justice in making it obligatory for the state to consider the right of future generations in its legislation on limiting CO₂ emissions, see <https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2021/bvg21-031.html>; <https://www.riffreporter.de/de/umwelt/verfassungsbeschwerde-gegen-klimaschutzgesetz-teilweise-erfolgreich>.

state–religion constitutional framework in Germany and should not be underestimated – many countries would long to have similar legally guaranteed and free spaces for religious organizations in their context as encountered in Germany.¹³

The miracle of Karlsruhe: Staying together in times of brutal violence, abject poverty and mounting global tensions – and acting together as well?

The peculiar mixture of the different elements of an assembly is what makes for the unique spirit of this event: a global festival of faith and companionship, an international celebration of the essentials of Christian faith plus the highest decision-making body of the largest and most important international ecumenical organization, the WCC – Karlsruhe was everything at the same time, therefore making it not at all easy for journalists to grasp the specific nature and common direction of this event. The rich spiritual life during the intercultural morning worships and also the daily home groups (where a smaller number of some 20 to 30 delegates and advisors would meet in the same composition throughout the assembly) were the two essentials forums which brought people together for mutual bonding, learning and embrace (not to speak of the significance of the short coffee breaks as an opportunity for mutual encounter and bonding):

Loving God. We gather from all over the world, from the eight regions of the World Council of Churches, from diverse contexts, every one of us created in your image.

We share the hope of meeting each other in the warm embrace of Christ's love, that moves us to reconciliation and unity.

We share the burden and the pain of this time of the Covid pandemic. We share the burden and the pain of armed conflicts and their consequences in deaths, destruction and forced migration. We share the burden and the pain of the preexisting plagues of injustice, structural poverty, violence, and a creation that suffers.¹⁴

These words from the opening prayer in the assembly still resonate in my mind, as these simple, but honest words receive deep significance and meaning when a delegate from churches in Ukraine is standing right next to you, and another delegate from the Presbyterian church of Pakistan who just talked about the disastrous impact of the floods is sitting on the other side while a friend from West-Papua was just lamenting human rights violations behind you, then saying the Our Father together and you still feel their pain directly. The art of combining words, symbolism, gestures and different styles of music in the morning liturgies was an overwhelming experience of being brought together, of being centered, of being transformed by God's Spirit. The very theme of the assembly as such ("Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity"), the surplus of its language of promise was given the most powerful translation and visible expression by the transforming experiences during the occasions of common worship and spiritual life in the assembly. There cannot be expressed enough gratitude to the worship preparatory committee for this.

In Christ shall true hearts everywhere

Their high communion find;

God's service is the golden cord

Close binding humankind.

¹³ See: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/menschenrechte/-/227624>; see also: 2. Bericht der Bundesregierung zu Religionsfreiheit, <https://religionsfreiheit.bmz.de/religionsfreiheit-de/der-bericht>.

¹⁴ Oasis of Peace. Spiritual Life Resources, WCC 2022, p. 30.

*In Christ is neither Jew nor Greek,
And neither slave nor free;
For men and women live in God,
And all are kin to me.*

*In Christ now meet both East and West,
In Christ meet South and North;
One joyous true community throughout the whole wide earth.¹⁵*

Certainly, this language transcended concrete realities – as the language of faith is always both anticipatory and related to current sufferings and divisions. Because as soon as the second thematic plenary had started on 2 September it became all too obvious how far Christianity still is away from its vision of being “[o]ne joyous true community throughout the whole wide earth”. It can be booked as a success that the assembly continued until the very end without any delegation having left it out of protest or resignation from membership in WCC. However, the emphatic affirmation in the core declaration of the message that the ecumenical fellowship would also move from “staying (and praying) together” to also “act together” can be regarded as the critical benchmark and criterion according to which the long-term impact of this assembly should be measured and assessed.¹⁶ It is matter of honesty and humbleness to admit that the assembly has also acknowledged its own shortcomings and weaknesses in terms of moving from common words to common action:

Reconciliation is a movement toward God and toward each other. It implies a readiness to listen to God and to one another. It is a conversion of the heart, from selfishness and apathy to inclusion and service, acknowledging our interdependence with creation. We confess that, even as we desire with our whole hearts to serve God and our neighbour, we have found ourselves failing, disagreeing, and sometimes walking in opposite directions. We confess that we need the transformative power of Christ's love to move to a world truly reconciled and united.... In our assembly, we have used many words, but from these we have fashioned a new resolve. Now we ask God's assistance to transform our commitments into action.¹⁷

The struggle and the powerlessness of Karlsruhe: Continuing the line of Amsterdam 1948 “War is contrary to the will of God”

The war situation in Eastern Europe left a strong mark on the programmatic proceedings of the assembly – criticized by some delegates from the South also for focussing attention too much on Europe. As far as I heard there were about 37 different versions of the program outline for the thematic plenary on Europe – indicating the amount of controversies and diplomatic tuning which was taking place behind the surface. At the end a clear focus on voices from war-torn Ukraine dominated – certainly a result of the commitment to give the voices of victims a clear voice and visibility. Other perspectives, for instance

¹⁵ Oasis of Peace, Karlsruhe Worship Book, p. 56

¹⁶ See Message of the WCC 11th Assembly, “A Call to Act Together”, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/message-of-the-wcc-11th-assembly-a-call-to-act-together>.

¹⁷ See: Message of the 11th Assembly, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/message-of-the-wcc-11th-assembly-a-call-to-act-together>.

on the impressive history of ecumenical achievements in the European context in past decades despite demographic shrinking of church membership, did not get the chance of being articulated to the global audience.¹⁸ In the European plenary, two shocking voices called for major attention, one from Ukrainian archbishop Yevstratiy of Chernihiv and Nizhy and the other from Prof. Sergii Bortnyk from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church who both reported about the impact and brutality of the Russian invasion into Ukraine.¹⁹ One of the big disappointments during the course of the assembly was then that at no time there was any official response to be heard from the Russian Orthodox Delegation with regard to their fellow Christian brothers from Ukraine. Already at the opening plenary, German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier as a Christian as well as a head of state had called the assembly in quite un-diplomatic and very clear and explicit language to distance itself from any political misuse of the language of faith and to learn from the lessons which Germany had gone through in many years of suffering during the period of Nazi terror:

We must never allow religion, which is intended to build up, encourage and edify people, to become a means to humiliate others, a tool of hatred and violence... The heads of the Russian Orthodox Church are currently leading their members and their entire church down a dangerous, indeed blasphemous path that goes against all that they believe. They are justifying a war of aggression against Ukraine – against their own and our own brothers and sisters in the faith. We have to speak out, also here in this room, in this Assembly, against this stance, this propaganda targeting the freedom and rights of the citizens of another country, this nationalism, which arbitrarily claims that a dictatorship's imperial dreams of hegemony are God's will.²⁰

While some voices remained critical of these words, viewing them as less helpful to allow for real and open dialogue between both sides and the Russian delegation dismissing them as part of a western political campaign against Russia,²¹ I cannot but praise Steinmeier's words as a critical reminder to the WCC and the ecumenical movement as a whole that real dialogue should be honest and requires bridge-builders from both sides. Thus he was not imposing something on the assembly of churches as a head of state which would have been alien to the task of the church,²² but as a Christian himself reminded the assembly of its own original mandate:

¹⁸ It was to a certain extent understandable but also a pity that remarkable achievements in the European context like the history of three European Ecumenical Christian Assemblies since 1989, the impact and role of the Charta Oecumenica from 2001 or the Growth in Agreement on the doctrine of justification between the Roman Catholic Church 1999 did not play any significant role. See: <https://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ChartaOecumenica.pdf>; <https://faithineurope.org.uk/category/topic/third-european-ecumenical-assembly-sibiu/>; <https://www.lutheranworld.org/jddj>.

¹⁹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/churches-stress-the-need-for-reconciliation-unity-and-peacebuilding-in-ukraine>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Yp8ji2xrns>.

²⁰ <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2022/220831-VV-OeKR.html>.

²¹ Metropolitan Antony of Moscow, leader of the Russian Orthodox delegation in Karlsruhe, has reacted furiously to the accusations. In his view, Steinmeier “completely overlooked the humanitarian interference of the Moscow Patriarchate in the confrontation in Ukraine.” According to him, Steinmeier's words were also an example of “unadulterated pressure by a high-ranking government representative on the oldest intra-Christian organisation, of interference in the internal affairs of the World Council and of an attempt to call into question the peace-making and politically neutral character of its work.” The Metropolitan expressed the hope that the World Council would remain an “independent platform for dialogue”, see: <https://cne.news/artikel/1649-russian-orthodox-church-furious-after-world-council-criticises-kirill>; <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/40804-russisch-orthodoxe-kirche-protestiert-gegen-steinmeier-rede>.

²² Some participants mistakenly took the speech of president Steinmeier as an indication that in Germany there were still some kind of state-church model at work where the head of state could dictate the church what to say and to do. Nothing could be

Yes, time and again Christians are called to be bridge-builders. That is and remains one of our most important tasks. But building bridges requires willingness on both sides of the river; a bridge cannot be constructed if one side tears down the pillars that support it. In the run-up to the Assembly, the opinion was expressed that dialogue at least should be made possible. Yes, but dialogue is not an end in itself. Dialogue must bring to light what is happening. Dialogue must draw attention to injustice, must identify both victims and perpetrators – and their henchmen.²³

As the aspiration and hope for real and honest dialogue was not met in Karlsruhe (except for a few individual and private talks), as both sides remained in a spirit of mutual isolation and no visible gestures of good will were exchanged between the Russian orthodox (ROC) delegation and the representatives of churches from Ukraine, much needs to be done to outline a clear roadmap for real and concrete steps for further stages in a process of rapprochement between both sides in the post assembly period. A vital contribution from the WCC still is urgently needed in this regard if the Council desires to remain credible – and not just to appear celebrating the affirmed membership of ROC as an achievement in itself.²⁴

The final declaration of the Karlsruhe assembly on the war in Ukraine²⁵ strongly reiterated the rejection of the military invasion as being contrary to the word of God, which had been articulated already in the orthodox pre-assembly.²⁶ It remains regrettable that the deep-seated feelings of cultural and political estrangement, perceptions of western dominance and military expansion of the NATO alliance to the East – which is sensed by many Russian Christians and which are rarely listened to in western media – could not be articulated and brought into some fruitful dialogue in a protected space of dialogue. At the same time, the well-formulated theological criticism that had been articulated before the assembly by a number of orthodox church and diaspora theologians over against the concept of “russkij mir”²⁷ despite its very wide circulation was not placed at any official agenda of the assembly for more critical and open dialogue, but was kept to side forums in Karlsruhe which were not primarily attended by delegates.²⁸ In the same sense of failing to table real debates and controversies on the open platform of the assembly, the WCC did not manage to give public attention to the important “Statement of solidarity with the Orthodox declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (russkii mir) teaching, and against Christian Nationalism and New Totalitarianism” which was signed by a number of important theologians from both orthodox and protestant background (including Jürgen Moltmann) and took up very similar arguments against

farther from reality. See: Joachim Ochel: “Church State Relationships in Germany”, https://www.oekumene-ack.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Nationale_Kircheneraete/Ochel_Church_State_Relations.pdf.

²³ <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2022/220831-VV-OeKR.html>.

²⁴ See <https://blackchristiannews.com/2022/09/russian-orthodox-church-keeps-membership-in-the-world-council-of-churches-despite-controversy-over-war-in-ukraine/>.

²⁵ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-statement-on-war-in-ukraine-deplores-illegal-and-unjustifiable-invasion-renews-calls-for-ceasefire>.

²⁶ “During our deliberations, there was an expression of grave concern over the armed conflict in Ukraine that has already claimed many people’s lives. The participants in the meeting have been unanimous in condemning the wars and call upon all the parties involved in the conflicts to do everything within their power for the urgent establishment of peace and for ensuring safety in Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the whole world. We also condemn systematic campaigns of disinformation that promote divisions and hatred. In this time of great hardships, we are called to lift up fervent prayers to Christ the Saviour so that hatred may not take hold of human souls and hearts, but, instead, love and fraternal communion may return to the brotherly peoples in anguish.” published from May 18, 2022 (and causing the relegation of Hilarion, Head of the Department of External Affairs in the Moscow Patriarchate), <https://orthochristian.com/146211.html>.

²⁷ See <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>; see on the very controversial inner-orthodox reception of this critical paper: <https://orthochristian.com/145475.html>.

²⁸ <https://acadimia.org/en/news-announcements/press/1035-political-theology-nationalism-social-justice-and-eschatology-protestant-and-orthodox-approaches>.

the confusion of Christian identity with aggressive and imperialist concepts of nationalism and totalitarianism as what had already been articulated during the Oxford conference of 1937.²⁹

The concluding statement of the Public Issues Committee of the Karlsruhe assembly, however, “The things that make for peace – Moving the world to reconciliation and unity” includes a number of crucial commitments and recommendations in terms of a post-assembly peace ethics working agenda which are worth being noted. The document also refers to a rather critical assessment of reactions to armed conflict which primarily focus on delivery of arms and military escalation and a plea to take up the tradition of shaping the framework of a common security concept in Europe which had been developed by OSCE in the 1990s.³⁰ It remains to be seen whether in the dialogues which still need to be planned between WCC, ROC, Ukrainian churches as well as other ecumenical partners, earlier crucial theological statements on ecumenical peace ethics that had been developed and articulated on all relevant sides (including the famous conference in Kingston, Jamaica, 2011, on a theology of just peace³¹ and regional and denominational statements on ecumenical peace ethics³²) will fall into ecumenical amnesia as their language is not in harmony with some of the positions taken today. Alternatively, we need to see whether these positional papers can bear new fruits again by being brought forward in a joint dialogue with all related parties in a deliberate WCC road map for political peace ethics with the Russian Orthodox Church and all other churches in the region in a process towards moving for a post-war scenario in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Common conviction of Karlsruhe: Kairos for creation – we are running out of time

Already some months before the assembly the General Secretary of WCC declared convincingly that time had come for a new initiative of WCC and its member churches facing the urgent threats of a global climate emergency: “We must act now: If we don’t change our behavior, in 50 years our planet will be uninhabitable”.³³ It was highlighted that the WCC is the only faith based-organization that has had a permanent presence in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. The WCC also had been present at all the UN climate conferences since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The WCC played a prominent role in highlighting dangers to the environment even before the Rio summit. Therefore, the assembly statement³⁴ which was drafted by the Public Issues Committee on the global climate crisis was awaited with high expectancy in Germany and much beyond. It is striking that the statement uses the clause “We are running out of time” three times, borrowed from

²⁹ See <https://religioninpraxis.com/a-statement-of-solidarity-with-the-orthodox-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching-and-against-christian-nationalism-and-new-totalitarianism/>.

³⁰ The WCC “[a]ppeals for much greater financial and practical support by the international community for peace-building and peace-making rather than for division and military confrontation, and *underlines* the important role of women and youth as peacemakers, and of non-violent conflict transformation.

Reasserts the ecumenical movement’s rejection and denunciation of war as contrary to the will of God. *Calls*, for a global ceasefire, as an urgent moral imperative, in all armed conflicts around the world, and for parties to such conflicts to engage and persist in dialogue and negotiations until just and sustainable peace can be achieved, and to abstain from war.” <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/ADOPTED-PICo1.3rev-The-Things-That-Make-For-Peace-Moving-the-World-to-Reconciliation-and-Unity.pdf>.

³¹ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-way-of-just-peace>.

³² See EKD paper from the 2019 Synod in Dresden on a Theology of Just Peace (“Kirche eines gerechten Friedens werden”) or the 2020 Orthodox Statement “Towards the Life of this World – Ecumenical Patriarchate on Social Ethics of the Orthodox Church”.

³³ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/world-council-of-churches-leader-looks-to-assembly-in-germany-to-mobilize-action-for-climate-justice>.

³⁴ <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-living-planet-seeking-a-just-and-sustainable-global-community>.

the Wuppertal conference Kairos for Creation which was organized jointly by Bread for the World, UEM, EKD and EMW in 2019:

***We are running out of time** for this metanoia to take place. The Central Committee, meeting in June this year, noted the Pacific Island of Kiribati, facing rising sea-levels, had declared a State of Natural Disaster due to a prolonged drought. As we gather for the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, our sisters and brothers in Pakistan face the heaviest rainfall in living memory and flooding that has killed 1,162 people, injured 3,554 and displaced 33 million. Four years of failed rains in the Horn of Africa have put 22 million people at risk of starvation. In Europe, a drought unprecedented in 500 years has affected large swathes of the continent. Such extreme weather, and accompanying humanitarian crises are the alarm bells of a Climate Emergency. Moreover, instability and increased competition for resources resulting from climate change greatly exacerbates conflict risks. In addition, climate change is a public health emergency, having been recognized as a leading cause of human mortality and morbidity. Climate-induced displacement, relocation or migration is no longer a matter of if or when, but is occurring now.*

***We are running out of time.** We must repent from our continuing human selfishness, greed, denial of facts and apathy, which threatens the life of all creation.*

***We are running out of time.** This Assembly is the last chance we have to act together to prevent the planet from becoming uninhabitable. In particular, no further delay is possible if we are to have any chance of staying within the safer limit of +1.5°C global warming and of avoiding vastly more catastrophic climate change.³⁵*

The key recommendation demands a clear priority setting for all WCC member churches and the WCC itself in terms of focussing on issues related to the global climate crisis:

The Assembly joins the WCC central committee in urging all member churches and ecumenical partners around the world to give the climate emergency the priority attention that a crisis of such unprecedented and all-encompassing dimensions deserves, both in word and deed, and to amplify their efforts to demand the necessary action by their respective governments within the necessary timeframe to limit global warming to 1.5°C and to meet historic responsibilities to poorer, more vulnerable nations and communities.³⁶

It will be of crucial importance to monitor the implementation of four key practical recommendations which have been set at the end of the statement:

- *Urgently establishing a **Commission on Climate Change and Sustainable Development Emergency and Economic Injustice**, convened by the WCC in collaboration with ecumenical partners, in order to monitor progress and to advise on measures to accelerate our efforts for the protection of God's creation, and for the promotion of just and sustainable communities.*
- *Declaring an **Ecumenical Decade of repentance and action for a just and flourishing planet.***
- *To set an example by committing **WCC to reduce its institutional carbon footprint to net-zero by 2030.***

³⁵ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-living-planet-seeking-a-just-and-sustainable-global-community>.

³⁶ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-living-planet-seeking-a-just-and-sustainable-global-community>.

- *Establishing **strict limitations on travel for WCC purposes**, preferring virtual means of consultation and encounter. These online engagements and the use of electronic devices by WCC should also be mindful of ongoing environmental costs and the impact on children forced into extractive industries for rare earth minerals.*³⁷

There was surprisingly little time during the assembly in Karlsruhe to really discuss the challenges for the implementation of this demanding new global ecological agenda for the ecumenical movement concerning the commitment to tackle the root causes of the global climate emergency. Also, the remarkable Faith and Order Study on “Cultivate and Care. Justice for and within Creation”³⁸ which was published prior to the assembly as the first theological Faith and Order study on a joint theological language of all Christian denominations on Creation Care – together with the new volume “International Handbook on Creation Care and Eco-Diakonia,”³⁹ which was presented to GETI and on other occasions – would have deserved more attention.

What does it mean to reorder future priorities for finances and staff in WCC’s work and in related ecumenical agencies if this agenda really has to be taken up? What kind of time plan is required in case the statement “we are running out of time” is true? What are the potentials and concrete models of cooperation with other faith traditions and with the UNEP decade on reconstruction of global ecosystems?⁴⁰ Are regional and local interfaith councils and associations properly equipped and engaged in issues relating to the global environmental and climate emergency? Are our research hubs, theological education institutions, scholarship funds and international exchange and research programs sufficiently geared toward the field of ecology and religion if this massive mobilization of the religious sector and “greening of religions” for the survival of this planet can become a reality and not just an appeal? These questions remain on the post-assembly agenda.

And yet it moves – this could be clearly seen during the Karlsruhe assembly, regarding the ecological dimension of the global ecumenical movement. However, dream and reality of the mandate and actual work of the ecumenical movement still are in tension with each other and often fall apart. For the WCC to become an avant-garde again in the area of ecological ethics and the eco-system’s reconstruction like it used to be in the midst of the 1970s, when the concept of sustainable development was actually born and formulated during a WCC conference on Faith, Science and the Future (Bucharest 1974), there is need for a deliberate working process and design for more and broader involvement of both grassroots groups, research and church related agencies.

Witnessing to peace and justice in the Holy Land – Is Israel an apartheid state? Or: What language helps for real progress in a situation of continued occupation and increasing polarization?

The issues of justice and peace in the Middle East has been a priority on the agenda of WCC for decades.⁴¹ Almost no assembly passed without a statement on the Middle East.⁴² Relating to the region

³⁷ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-living-planet-seeking-a-just-and-sustainable-global-community>.

³⁸ <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/cultivate-and-care>.

³⁹ <https://www.regnumbooks.net/products/international-handbook-on-creation-care-and-eco-diakonia>.

⁴⁰ <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/>.

⁴¹ A survey from 2017 had summarized all key position of WCC concerning the conflict in Israel-Palestine, see <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-policy-on-palestine-and-israel-1948-2016-summary>.

⁴² See: Middle East statement from Vancouver assembly 1983, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-middle-east>; Middle East statement from 2013 Busan assembly: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-affirming-the-christian-presence-and-witness-in-the-middle-east>;

where Christianity was born and is increasingly threatened in its survival due to migration, violence, instability and discrimination has always been a sensitive issue for the ecumenical family. In the month before the assembly, this was one of the issues most debated in press articles as the perceptions and framework from which churches – for instance from South Africa and the US – are viewing this situation are different in language from the specific historical and hermeneutical conditions by which churches from Germany are viewing the conflict. In German churches the perceptions of the Middle East context and language used for prophetic witness cannot but also take into account the history of the Shoah and Christian anti-judaism, which is a global, not just a German issue. This leads to sensitivities which these churches have to bring into the international ecumenical dialogue without being hesitant to boldly and clearly name injustices in the occupation of Palestine as what they are: grave violations of international law and human rights. The United Church of Christ Israel Palestine network had published a strong statement in 2021,⁴³ calling Israel's occupation and separation policy an expression of apartheid and a sin, thereby trying to take up and echo the Palestinian "Cry for Hope" from 2021.⁴⁴ In a similar direction the Network of Palestinian Christians in the US-based Palestinian Alliance of Christians for Peace on 3rd of September had sent an open letter to the WCC assembly pointing to the fact that both Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International as well as the Israelian Human Rights Organization Betsalem had called the current grave human rights violations an "apartheid" situation and asked the assembly to "name and condemn Israeli apartheid against Palestinians and to bring to bear the same level of pressure and activism against Israeli apartheid as it did to South African apartheid."⁴⁵ Some of those churches which belong to Kairos Palestina South Africa had clearly stated that the ongoing conflict in the Middle East was to be interpreted and named as a racial conflict with the term apartheid already applied since 2010 and therefore demanded a more visible commitment of WCC to the BDS movement.⁴⁶ Many had expected that this could become an unsolvable challenge and could even cause a major breaking apart of the ecumenical fellowship in the assembly.

Interim General Secretary Ioan Sauca took a bold step at the beginning by addressing the issues upfront in his major report, which would be discussed in the plenary.⁴⁷ Under the heading of "visiting the wounds" he referred to the official visit of a delegation prior to the assembly in Israel and Palestine in July 2022.

*Our message and our visit of solidarity was meant to reassure our sisters and brothers in the Holy Land that they are not alone and abandoned, that the WCC continues to remain with them and to accompany them, and advocate for and defend their dignity and human rights when faced with hardships and tribulations.*⁴⁸

Ioan Sauca summarized the key elements of the WCC position, strongly rejecting the accusation that the WCC was anti-Semitic. The core convictions are included in No 66 and 67:

⁴³ See <https://www.palestineportal.org/news-center/2021-community-news/ucc-resolution-2021/>.

⁴⁴ <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Global-Kairos-Cry-for-Hope--Anti-racism-resources--new-book-from-Palestine-stop-Annexation-bill.html?soid=1102837461929&aid=cC59blUveGw>.

⁴⁵ See https://www.kairospalestine.ps/images/PCAP_Statement_To_WCC_11th_Assembly-2022-09-03.pdf.

⁴⁶ BDS stands for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement; See: <https://kairossouthernafrika.wordpress.com/>; and already in 2010: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/south-african-response-to-kairos-palestine-document>.

⁴⁷ Surprisingly, the space provided for a general debate in the plenary after both reports from Moderator Agnes Abuom and General Secretary Ioan Sauca was used actively only by very few delegates, thus diminishing the time and space for controversial dialogue in the later business sessions.

⁴⁸ Report of the Acting General Secretary of WCC, <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/A02-Report-of-the-Acting%20General-Secretary-ENG.pdf>.

66. *To those who accuse WCC as being anti-Semitic, I would say boldly that already in 1948 the WCC acknowledged the history of Christian anti-Judaism and denounced antisemitism as a sin. And while we are critical of some policies of the State of Israel, again since 1948, the WCC recognizes the State of Israel and respects the right of Israel to defend itself and take care of its citizens, within the perspective of international law. We oppose, reject, condemn, and denounce all forms of antisemitism. 67. At the same time, we support equal human rights for Palestinians and oppose, reject, condemn, and denounce situations when these are not respected. Protesting against human rights violations when they occur and asking the Israeli government to protect all its people, whether they be Israeli or Palestinians, has nothing to do with antisemitism; it is a natural and normal exercise in any democratic society. We ask that the dignity and human rights of Palestinians are respected. We ask for the equal treatment of all citizens. We call firmly and consistently for the end of occupation. We have repeatedly affirmed the two state policy based on international law. We want to see Israelis and Palestinians cohabiting together on the path to peace, reconciliation, to just peace.*⁴⁹

The report then directly addressed the most controversial issue:

68. *At the same time, some groups on the Palestinian side and some groups in the West have challenged us for being soft and not bold enough in denouncing and condemning human rights violations. Furthermore, based on the recent report of Amnesty International, we received letters, requests and proposals from some in our WCC constituency, in particular from South Africa and a few from the West, to change WCC policy at the assembly in Karlsruhe and denounce Israel as an apartheid state because of its treatment of Palestinians. Support for BDS (Disinvestment and Sanctions) as a way of resistance and pressure on the state of Israel toward the end of occupation and respect of human rights has also been proposed and reaffirmed. All these developments are complex and sensitive with profound implications.*⁵⁰

It was very clear that these reflections of the General Secretary were not meant to silence, ignore or even sideline any of the Palestine sentiments regarding the brutality of ongoing repression in the Palestine territories, but were meant as a nuanced approach to listen to the voices of churches on the ground:

69. *All, with no exception, spoke about the difficult situation of the Palestinians, about cases of violations of human rights the impunity of the aggressive acts of settlers, the demolition of houses, violations of properties and expropriations, restrictions of access to religious sites, and attempts to remove the Christian presence from the Old City of Jerusalem. All were grateful for the work of the WCC and our presence in the region, valued the work of the WCC Jerusalem Liaison Office and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (and emphasized how important this work is for the local communities).*

71. *Yet, when it came to the issues of apartheid and BDS they were all very cautious and nuanced. They asked the WCC to continue advocating for and defending their cause and rights but to be careful about speaking on their behalf and proposing terminology and actions that would close the doors to dialogue and threaten their very existence in the Holy Land. What do you expect we be achieved if the WCC assembly calls Israel an apartheid state, I was asked? How do you want us to support BDS which means boycotting ourselves, the local businesses of our people, our own existence here? Please, be careful with what you*

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

propose on our behalf, I was told; think of our situation here and our future. This was the message I brought back from this visit.⁵¹

In the Public Issues Committee the final declaration on the situation of justice and peace in the Middle East was discussed with great sensitivity and nuanced argumentation while trying to listen to all sides. The final declaration adopted in Karlsruhe does not fall short in calling structural injustice what it is:

In Palestine/Israel, there is another wave of forced displacement of Palestinian people from their homes – sometimes on multiple occasions since 1948 – as in Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan, the South Hebron Hills, as well as in the rest of Area C. The expanding Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, especially those encircling East Jerusalem, are illegal under international law and threaten fundamental demographic and political changes to the region. Moreover, they have so undermined any practical prospect of a two-state solution that this path towards a just peace now seems increasingly unviable. The expansion of the settlements and the increased military presence that accompanies them have brought more suffering for Palestinian communities, with more encroachment on and seizure of Palestinian lands and properties, and increased systematic harassment and attacks by settlers (especially in the absence of the protective presence of international visitors during the Covid-19 pandemic).⁵²

The WCC also had articulated a consensus already earlier that to a limited extent, not as a general measure against Israel as such, campaigns of boycotting goods from occupied territories could be a meaningful part of Christian witness in a situation of ongoing grave structural injustice of the occupation:

Certain economic measures are legitimate forms of non-violent resistance to occupation and positive pressure for peace. WCC supports an international boycott of goods and services from illegal Israeli settlements in the OPT. WCC considers targeted economic measures an important non-violent strategy for promoting peace and abating violence, and encourages member churches to avoid investments or other economic links to illegal activities on occupied territory.⁵³

In an effort to do justice to both sides, the final statement made a reference to both sides, rather than embarking on a detailed analysis of the argumentation of both sides. It referred on the one hand to those who strongly felt that calling the state of Israel an apartheid state has become a necessity out of Christian responsibility for their point of view. On the other hand it also referred to those who feared that this would not help the situation of the Palestinians and would instead transfer a concept born out of a different context while emphasizing the need to call all structural injustice occurring in as strong terms as possible. A clear reference however is made explicitly to several initiatives demanding for a strong rejection of Israel's government by being called an apartheid state. But this language was not adopted by WCC on its own and for the whole of the ecumenical fellowship as churches represented by WCC, as there was no consensus in this regard:

Recently, numerous international, Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations and legal bodies have published studies and reports describing the policies and actions of Israel as amounting to “apartheid”

⁵¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/A02-Report-of-the-Acting%20General-Secretary-ENG.pdf>.

⁵² See <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/seeking-justice-and-peace-for-all-in-the-middle-east>.

⁵³ See from 2017: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-policy-on-palestine-and-israel-1948-2016-summary>; see also <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/to-media-wcc-responds-to-false-media-reporting-on-israel-and-bds>.

*under international law. Within this Assembly, some churches and delegates strongly support the utilization of this term as accurately describing the reality of the people in Palestine/Israel and the position under international law, while others find it inappropriate, unhelpful and painful. We are not of one mind on this matter. We must continue to struggle with this issue, while we continue working together on this journey of justice and peace. We pray that the WCC continues to provide a safe space for its member churches for conversation and collaboration in pursuing truth, and working for a just peace among all people of the region.*⁵⁴

It has often been overheard that the statement also called strongly for a reform of the Palestinian Authority in order to counter its own human rights violations and to make it more accountable to basic principles of transparency and human dignity: “For Palestinian people, the situation is sadly compounded by the grave failings of the Palestinian authorities, including reprisals against opposition leaders and the lack of legal and democratic accountability.”⁵⁵

While it is true that the different layers and levels of the public debate during the assembly were not providing sufficient space and time to discuss the deeply rooted and serious arguments which informed both positions and the political as well as pastoral implications of both options for the situation of churches in the Middle East on the ground, the deliberate attempt of the assembly leadership based on the consensus principle definitely was not to side-line any position, and the intention not to silence any Palestinian position could clearly be recognized. However, time management did not allow for a more open and frank debate on the detailed argumentation from both respective positions in the plenary thus not giving a sufficient chance to hear the desperate feeling of many Palestinian Christians, that their cry for hope (2020)⁵⁶ was not sufficiently listened to in the wider ecumenical community and therefore they felt pressed to use stronger language of denouncing an oppressive policy of violent segregation. As a result, severe criticism was raised towards both WCC and EKD churches from Christian Palestine Peace Network⁵⁷ and American churches⁵⁸ soon after the assembly, sadly mounting even to the blunt and misleading accusation that the election of a German Bishop as Moderator to the Central Committee needs to be seen as clear indication that a deliberate (German) strategy of silencing the Palestinians and ignoring expressions of their suffering would continue in WCC.⁵⁹ Solidarity with the Palestinian suffering, however, is not necessarily identical with radicalized political rhetoric and mutual accusations, which can unintentionally close all remaining space for Palestinian civil society organizations and also the important international EAPPI program to be supported by churches in the ecumenical movement. And what is gained if one adopts a radical rhetoric but at the same time destroys the common platform which is needed for really being effective in moving towards some tangible change in the powerful and complex political settings in the region which everybody concerned should know about? The conflict about the “apartheid” terminology also reveals how much still needs to be done in the post-Karlsruhe period in terms of bringing all sides to one common table, to understand the common Christian responsibility to counter both any real antisemitism as well as to not allow for any weakening of criticism over against settlement policies by the arbitrary use of the antisemitism accusation. The need to avoid ideological

⁵⁴ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/seeking-justice-and-peace-for-all-in-the-middle-east>.

⁵⁵ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/seeking-justice-and-peace-for-all-in-the-middle-east>.

⁵⁶ See <https://www.cryforhope.org/>.

⁵⁷ https://www.kairopalestine.ps/images/EKD_Protest_Letter.pdf.

⁵⁸ See <https://mondoweiss.net/2022/09/world-council-of-churches-general-assembly-puts-israeli-apartheid-on-the-global-churches-table/>.

⁵⁹ See last paragraph: “Protest of the Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network: EKD distances itself from international law and pressures WCC to suppress Palestinian voice”, https://www.kairopalestine.ps/images/EKD_Protest_Letter.pdf.

hardening or the radicalization of certain campaigns which are born out of understandable feelings of frustration and the increased sense of powerlessness and stalemate is clearly on the table as well as the need to move beyond the current impasse in the Middle East which benefits only those who hold power.⁶⁰

Healing the wounds of past and present – racism, xenophobia and antisemitism

Although not so much present during the plenary sessions, the issues of racism, xenophobia and white supremacy played a major role in several instances and dialogues in Karlsruhe. The WCC was recalling its clear stance against racism since the Uppsala assembly in 1968 as well as its long years of struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa by stating a new resolve to intensify its program against racism, discrimination and xenophobia.⁶¹ The history of the slave trade of several centuries and colonialism still is related to wounds afflicted, which demand truth telling, listening to the wounded and the healing of memories for many:

Indeed, racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination and hatred have become even more salient in recent years, due to the negative use of social media and anti-foreigner populist nationalist movements in several countries. Racism and xenophobia intersect with discrimination based on ethnicity, national origin, religion, economic status, gender, disability and other factors that intensify systems of exclusion, such as statelessness, that deny people their dignity as human beings created in the Imago Dei. Over the centuries, people of African descent, those on the African continent and in the diaspora, have suffered racism, xenophobia and discrimination at the hands of all other groups within the human family. Racist-based enslavement of Africans, especially during the transatlantic slave trade of the 15th–19th centuries, saw whole communities of African peoples being destroyed by slave traders. Many African lives were lost due to the inhumane conditions they suffered as they were forcibly uprooted and trafficked across the Atlantic.⁶²

Remarkably enough the assembly at the same time also countered the critical voice of those who had launched a preconceived campaign against the WCC labelling it as anti-Semitic even before the assembly had actually started. In this direction, the same document stated with great clarity also the following:

Meeting in the country where, during the Second World War, the Holocaust of the Jews was conceived and from which it was perpetrated, we acknowledge the legitimate fears of Jewish people around the world of the shortness of the trajectory from antisemitic attitudes and hate speech to genocide. Populist nationalist forces have in many places unleashed and encouraged latent antisemitism, with the consequence of increased violent attacks as well as discrimination against Jewish people and communities. The churches have a continuing responsibility to confront the scourge of antisemitism, given the historic role of churches in promoting and disseminating it. Though ancient in its origins, antisemitism remains an ever-present threat, returning in new forms and through new voices in every generation. Here in Karlsruhe, we reaffirm

⁶⁰ See for the further post-assembly debate <https://www.sonntagsblatt.de/artikel/debatte/die-karlsruher-weltversammlung-und-der-kampf-um-den-begriff-apartheidstaat>.

⁶¹ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/racism-discrimination-and-xenophobia>.

⁶² Statement on confronting racism and xenophobia, overcoming discrimination, ensuring belonging. WCC Assembly document PIC 01.5 rev., from Assembly App.

*the categorical denunciation by the WCC's founding Assembly in Amsterdam of antisemitism as sin against God and humanity.*⁶³

It is remarkable that this commitment was not put into question by anybody but was passed unanimously – although less quoted in the press. It can be taken for almost certain that the related practical recommendations passed and added at the end of this declaration from the PIC will still keep the global ecumenical movement busy and more deeply engaged in the years to come:

*[The PIC] [a]cknowledges that racism and xenophobia still impact many communities and individuals in all regions, and intersect toxically with other forms of discrimination, and therefore commends the WCC for establishing a new transversal programme on racism, xenophobia and related discriminations. Encourages this ecumenical body to revisit the complicity of some religious bodies in the painful past of enslavement, colonialism, and its current expressions to journey towards repentance, confession, reparations, reconciliation and healing.*⁶⁴

Karlsruhe and the inter-generational conflict: Youth demanding more participation in the ecumenical movement

The Ecumenical Youth Gathering (EYG), attended by around 200 young participants, was one of the six pre-assemblies in Karlsruhe⁶⁵ and a powerful platform for young ecumenists to engage with each other and with the assembly theme. The impressive lamentations articulated together in the EYG Final Message exposed a profound list of how the younger generations experience the suffering of this earth and suppression of human dignity as major burdens on their ability to develop a positive future prospect for their lives.⁶⁶ Their message was quite clear:

*The youth called upon the WCC to provide a meaningful space for an equal representation of young people in all its processes, to establish a permanent youth desk focused on advocacy and reconciliation towards unity, and to listen actively to the cries of the young people, especially those in oppressed communities and those fighting for climate justice.*⁶⁷

⁶³ See: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-confronting-racism-and-xenophobia-overcoming-discrimination-ensuring-belonging>.

⁶⁴ Statement on confronting racism and xenophobia, overcoming discrimination, ensuring belonging. WCC Assembly document PIC 01.5 rev., from Assembly App

⁶⁵ See: <https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly#pre-assemblies>; Unfortunately, the important messages of the six pre-assemblies, while being received by the assembly as part of the programme guidelines report, could not be presented and formally discussed in the plenary: “The PGC also reflected on the outcomes of the pre-assemblies of Just Community of Women and Men, Ecumenical Youth Gathering, Ecumenical Disabilities Advocacy Network (EDAN), and Indigenous Peoples, as well as the pre-assembly of specialized ministries, which was held online in March 2022. The PGC is grateful for the important work of these pre-assemblies, as well as their outcomes and on-going work which will be important for future programmatic work”, Report Program Guidelines Committee Point No 5, see <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/PGC%2001%20rev%20Report%20of%20the%20Programme%20%20Guidelines%20Committee.pdf>.

⁶⁶ The EYG Message can be found under <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/PRE-EYG%20Message%20from%20the%20Ecumenical%20Youth%20Gathering%20rev.pdf>.

⁶⁷ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/choose-the-power-of-love-pre-assemblies-deliver-powerful-calls>;

With the generation of young people in the age group between 15 and 30 being disproportionately strong in churches of Africa and Asia (where sometimes up to 45% of the population is young, whereas in some of the “older” churches like in Germany youth makes up only about 10%),⁶⁸ the intergenerational conflicts gained more momentum in recent decades as the accessibility of representation and seats in both the churches and in ecumenical bodies like the WCC remain constant issues. Although 25% of the seats in the new Central Committee according to decisions of that same body were supposed to be allocated to young candidates, only the target of 13% of youth was reached after complicated efforts of the nominations committee to convince national delegations to make place for younger representatives and to not just send their elder church representatives. The protest against this situation, which was not so much an issue and problem with the leading bodies and committees of the assembly but of the sending and nominating churches was a brave and remarkable action of young delegates on the open stage of one of the business sessions. They had articulated themselves also convincingly before the assembly.⁶⁹ The proposal to add more seats to the numbers of representatives in the Central Committee and to have additional youth representatives and/or to add eight voluntary youth presidents from different regions to the eight presidents has thus been included in the special statement of the youth which is recorded as appendix to the report of the Policy Reference committee.⁷⁰ This has to be taken up by the newly elected Central Committee in 2023.

On the other hand, Karlsruhe was not discouraging at all in terms of the role of young leaders: The GETI Project⁷¹ which was invented and brought into the spectrum of regular assembly and conference activities of WCC since 2013 this time brought together some 200 young ecumenical theologians plus theological facilitators and senior lecturers who shared in a program both a remote learning web-based phase as well as a residential phase in an academy hotel in Karlsruhe which was ideally equipped for such a highly demanding exercise of intercultural learning, listening and theological dialogue. Planned by an International Planning Group under the leadership of Dr. Kuzipa Nalwamba, a unique group emerged and convinced by its sharp questions, well-articulated comments to lectures and a remarkable eagerness to learn from each other: There is hope for the forthcoming new leadership generation in the younger generation if we experience something like GETI – and this included several cases and persons who had already participated in the first GETI program in Busan, South Korea, and who now served as facilitators, lecturers or delegates in the assembly.

Methodological dilemmata: How to provide space for honest dialogue and controversy as well as cohesion and substance in ecumenical theology and ecumenical memory through and during an assembly?

More than 30 different reports and statements during the assembly, more than 20 preparatory WCC publications, books and collections of texts before and during the assembly, many of which were

⁶⁸ The percentage of the German population aged 15 to 24 has reached its lowest point since the beginning of current records in 1950, according to data published by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany. Although the German population as a whole has grown, surpassing 83.2 million for the first time at the end of 2021, only 10% of the population were in the key age group of 15 to 24-year-olds. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-number-of-young-people-falls-to-record-low/a-62584549>.

⁶⁹ See: Joy Eva Bohol and Benjamin Simon (eds.), *Let the Waves Roar. Perspectives of young prophetic voices in the ecumenical movement*, Geneva: WCC, 2021.

⁷⁰ Report of Policy Reference Committee, page 6, <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/PRCo1rev1-Report-of-the-Policy-Reference-Committe.pdf>.

⁷¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtlPP1ABmw>; <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/ecumenical-theological-education-ete#global-ecumenical-theological-institute>.

presented one by one in the Networking Zone, 23 ecumenical conversations in which the inner core of the programmatic work of the assembly was supposed to be going on with 40–60 participants each – how to cope with this massiveness of material within a short time frame? How to provide enough space and time for frank and open, controversial dialogue? Is it that the dominance of the consensus principle which is meant to allow for dissenting voices to articulate themselves and to get registered, to provide cohesion, instead led to a lack of occasions by which dissenting voices and positions could be brought into an open, meaningful and respectful dialogue? How to maintain an overview content-wise and how to provide a clear and meaningful introduction into the ecumenical memory for the majority of newcomers in an assembly setting? There are issues in the inner organization of an assembly process, which need to be looked into again. There was a 167 pages report on the ecumenical conversations during the previous assembly in Busan,⁷² and there will be an equally substantial and long report probably of the 23 ecumenical conversations from Karlsruhe (each report limited to 4–6 pages).⁷³ While the intention to come to commonly affirmed positions and decisions in a rather short time span of business plenaries and to give a broad spectrum of introductions into major thematic fields in the thematic plenaries is clear, the opportunities for delegates and observers to articulate their specific interests, critical questions and viewpoints during the assembly process were limited to ecumenical conversations and home groups. In addition, working conditions during the ecumenical conversations also suffered from acoustic problems in Karlsruhe, shortage of time, late arrival of delegates and discontinuity in the work stream and discourse processes. The expectation that the ecumenical conversations would be the main platform on which real programmatic issues for the future work of the WCC would be discussed was only partly met. How to meaningfully strengthen such an important space and instrument of ecumenical conversation for more substance and depth of ecumenical and theological work? How to reshape thematic plenaries to also include major theological and ecumenical debates? How many different subject areas can an assembly meaningfully deal with – and deal with in a way that avoids superficiality? Where could urgent additional concerns and key thematic interests of member churches, which were not reflected in preconceived papers and studies, be sufficiently articulated and listened to publicly?⁷⁴ Questions like these remain.

For newcomers to an assembly there was no substantial orientation session which could have provided some key-note lectures, for example on the history of and present state of affairs in

- ecumenical social ethics;
- ecumenical missiology;
- understandings and models of church unity;
- ecumenical theological and Christian education;
- world Christianity studies and current religious demography;
- interfaith dialogue within the ecumenical movement and beyond.

Keynote lectures to overarching thematic areas like these would have been an interesting and attractive additional offer not only for new delegates, but also for a more substantial orientation for many participants and journalists who were in need of first-hand introductions and additional orientation. The

⁷² See https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Ecumenical_Conversations.pdf.

⁷³ The overall report of the 23 ecumenical conversations was attached to the report of the program guidelines committee PGC 01 rev. and will be formally reviewed by the first Central Committee session in June 2023.

⁷⁴ For instance, we listed as a concern of several African member churches that the issues of increasing pressure from radicalized and militant Islamic movements on the African continent could not be properly articulated and discussed during the assembly.

often-visible lack of ecumenical memory in substantial aspects of ecumenical tradition and history otherwise is going only to widen with forthcoming assemblies.

The other main question are how to put major theological, ethical and ecclesial controversies within the ecumenical movement properly on the stage and give them sufficient time? How to become an honest and a wrestling assembly? How to provide a platform for a meaningful dialogue between opposite opinions, rather than to leave them to short-term (one minute!) interventions during highly restricted and congested business plenary meetings.⁷⁵

Looking back to earlier WCC assemblies reveals continuities and discontinuities: The central role of spiritual life, the role of crucial committees, statements on public issues as well as the attempt to focus on specific issues in smaller settings called ecumenical conversations have been a continuing feature since at least the Busan assembly 2013. The first assembly in which I participated, Canberra 1991, however, still had four fully-fledged *thematic sections* unfolding the general theme “Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation”. I still remember the hard and sustained ecumenical conceptual theological work that had taken place in the drafting committees of the different sections and the debates involved in the process of receiving and endorsing these section reports in the plenary at that time. Also, two major plenary theological lectures – representing different poles of the ecumenical dialogue at the time (Patriarch Parthenios III of Alexandria and Prof. Chung Hyun Kyung) – were placed centrally at the assembly in 1991, both of which led to years of interesting debate about the different approaches of orthodox and Asian feminist contextual theologies. Is the conceptual profiling of debates and clarity of different streams of theological work better served by a section-based working model of an assembly – rather than by the model of general thematic plenaries which was followed during the Karlsruhe assembly, unfolding different aspects of the umbrella theme? How about the programmatic depth and the length of an assembly being available and financially viable (in 1991 the duration was with 13 days, i.e. 4 days longer than the duration of the Karlsruhe assembly)? Answers to this question might look like the key challenge remains how to allow for a maximum of both theological input as well as proper participation and controversy in a limited framework of time and the given constraints, which might not improve in global ecumenism. How many assemblies of this size are we still going to have and can we afford in the future? Do we need a more regionalized approach and much more content preparation done in the eight different regions to bring core themes and key positions of churches to the forefront on the ground?

Perhaps, not many speeches and lectures from Karlsruhe will be remembered for years or re-occur as a rallying and reference point for continued international ecumenical debates. The three most outstanding speeches from my point of view – apart from the very important reports of General Secretary Ioan Sauca and Moderator Agnes Abuom at the beginning – were the ones from German president Steinmeier, the one from Azza Karam from Religions for Peace and the one from Ukrainian Archbishop Yevstratiy of Chernihiv and Nizhyn. But it might also be that a type of ecumenism focussed on great personalities and speeches from theologians somehow has passed and makes space for an ecumenism from below which was promoted in Karlsruhe as an “ecumenism of the heart.”⁷⁶ An ecumenism of the heart often was cited as a basic and fundamental requirement to any renewal in churches and their ecumenical relations. Time will show whether this really implies a liberation from ecclesial inertia and a deliberate

⁷⁵ Bishop Bosse-Huber unfortunately became the victim of organizational and moderation constraints when she intended to articulate a carefully designed statement on the position of the EKD churches on the issue of “apartheid” Israel, which was agreed to be granted 3 minutes (instead of just one minute) prior to the session, but then was out-booped as transgressing time limits, as the moderator had failed to communicate this to the auditorium and the delegates beforehand.

⁷⁶ See <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/world-council-of-churches-assembly-theme-urges-an-ecumenism-of-the-heart>; also: Susan Durber, “Christ’s Love moves the church – An Ecumenism of the Heart”, *The Ecumenical Review* 27 July 2021, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/erev.12613>.

pushing for bolder steps in ecumenical relations and common witness as it is very clear that an “ecumenism of the heart” cannot work without an action-oriented “ecumenism of the hand” and a bold common pilgrimage-oriented “ecumenism of the feet”.

The added value and surplus of God’s promise: And yet the it moves and transforms the world – continuing the ecumenical pilgrimage for justice, reconciliation and unity

No assembly is a perfect image of the ecclesial dream of ecumenism, a comprehensive realization of the prayer “that all may be one so that the world may believe”. However, Karlsruhe indeed was another important and successful, on the whole credible and strong reminder of the living dynamic of the ecumenical dream, which is part of the work of the Holy Spirit and often can only be affirmed and discerned in looking back after a while in a spirit of prayer and spiritual discernment of what an assembly actually has brought forward. The message of the assembly has pointed to the reality of this dream as being incorporated in the continuation of the ecumenical pilgrimage for justice, reconciliation and unity, which is as urgently needed as never before. It stated:

Amid all our diversity, we have relearned in our assembly that there is a pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation, and unity to be undertaken together.

- *Meeting together in Germany, we learn the cost of war and the possibility of reconciliation;*
- *Hearing the word of God together, we recognize our common calling;*
- *Listening and talking together, we become closer neighbours;*
- *Lamenting together, we open ourselves to each other’s pain and suffering;*
- *Working together, we consent to common action;*
- *Celebrating together, we delight in each other’s joys and hopes;*
- *Praying together, we discover the richness of our traditions and the pain of our divisions.⁷⁷*

Fernando Enns and others have articulated a lot of creative ideas and ecumenical wisdom in crafting an “ecumenical theology of companionship”⁷⁸ through which churches of different cultural and political contexts can accompany, stimulate, encourage, but also criticize and challenge each other. The Program Guidelines Committee envisioned a re-shaping of an Ecumenical Pilgrimage for Justice, Reconciliation and Unity as the inner core of a process of renewal within the common fellowship:

The beginning of our work has relationship building at its heart, but we want to go even further and revive a sense that the fellowship is a movement, even a prophetic movement. We do not want to lose the sense that we are ‘moving’ and that we are on a journey of justice and peace, prepared to struggle for them.

⁷⁷ <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/message-of-the-wcc-11th-assembly-a-call-to-act-together>.

⁷⁸ Fernando Enns, “Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Companionship”, *Ec Rev* April 2022, 268ff.

Deepened relationships should lead to radical change, to conversion, reconciliation, justice, and reparations. We affirm an ecumenism of the heart, but also an ecumenism of the feet in which we walk in the sandals of Jesus Christ.⁷⁹

Some of the most urgent areas and countries in which a continuation of this pilgrimage in my view is an urgent priority are the situations of Ukraine/Russia, Myanmar, the Horn of Africa, Zimbabwe, Haiti, Pakistan, India, China and Brazil. Already with these alone, an ecumenical agenda for post-assembly follow-up could be filled for at least three years.

It is a sign of the vitality of the ecumenical movement that despite adverse circumstances the governing bodies of WCC were able to smoothly handle not only the election of a new Central Committee including a new Moderator and Vice-Moderator,⁸⁰ but also to appoint a new General Secretary and new faces for all the three key leadership positions within the WCC (accomplished already some months before the assembly in 2022) – one of the most comprehensive generation changes in the leadership of the global ecumenical movement we ever had.

The WCC needs prayers and support by all those trying to follow the dynamic of Christ's love which moves, unites and transforms this world – as it is stated in one of the hymns of the worship book of Karlsruhe:

*May deep wisdom guide us as together
We move forward engaging in your loving activity.
We trust in your great faithfulness.
Amen.⁸¹*

⁷⁹ Report of Program Guidelines Committee, No. 27, <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/PGC%2001%20rev%20Report%20of%20the%20Programme%20%20Guidelines%20Committee.pdf>.

⁸⁰ <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/bishop-dr-heinrich-bedford-strohm-elected-as-wcc-moderator-we-are-one-church-in-this-global-world>.

⁸¹ Oasis of Peace, Karlsruhe Worship Book, p. 286.

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