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Ecumenism of the Heart as a Path to Unity

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Abstract

As the World Council of Churches (WCC) celebrates its 75th anniversary, the world faces many challenges, including ecological crises, violence, pandemics, systemic poverty, racism, gender-based violence, human rights violations, and the war in Ukraine that began in 2022. Taking as its basis the Unity Statement agreed at the WCC's 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2022, which met around the theme "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity," the article argues for an "ecumenism of the heart," of which the statement spoke, as a path to unity. It underlines that this is a "public theology" based not on political abstinence but on a passion for and renewed commitment to the world. The article concludes by exploring the challenges of such a public theology for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

Keywords

World Council of Churches, ecumenism of the heart, Bonhoeffer, global challenges

As the World Council of Churches (WCC) celebrates its 75th anniversary, we face many challenges in the world. As the Unity Statement of the WCC's 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe in 2022 put it, we live and bear witness "in a world that is God's wonderful creation, but at the same time is broken by ecological crises, violence, pandemics, systemic poverty, racism, gender-based violence, human rights violations and numerous other sufferings."¹

¹ "Unity Statement: Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity," in *Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: Report of the WCC 11th Assembly* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2023), 10–19, at 10, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/christs-love-moves-the-world-to-reconciliation-and-unity-report-of-the-wcc-11th-assembly>.

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The COVID-19 pandemic in particular has shown how vulnerable we are. A virus that we cannot even see with the naked eye has turned people's lives around the world upside down almost from one day to the next. The virological spread has been the subject of constant discussion. The effects on the health of the soul, however, have hardly been talked about publicly, although the long-term consequences of the pandemic and the measures taken to counter it – in children and adolescents, for example – are only beginning to become apparent.

The disastrous consequences of the climate crisis have now become so visible worldwide that no one who wishes to be taken seriously can deny them any longer. At the same time, the underestimation of this crisis for many decades in global politics has led to a growing fear, especially among young people, that it will be impossible to prevent the tipping points toward even more disastrous consequences. The means used to protest are becoming more radical, and this is accompanied by an increasing potential for social division around these issues.

And now we also have the terrible war in Ukraine, with no end in sight. Meanwhile, inflation around the world has greatly increased the challenges faced by those who were already struggling to make a living. In the fight against world hunger, we have been set back by the war and the pandemic. At the same time, while the number of billionaires has grown during the pandemic as never before, many who were already poor have lost their livelihoods completely.

This was the situation when the WCC gathered in Karlsruhe in 2022. We decided on the assembly theme some years before, at a time when we still knew nothing about the pandemic or the war in Ukraine. But it was exactly the right theme for the assembly. In a situation that could truly lead one to despair, it expressed a defiant hope, a hope that we have rarely needed as much as we do right now: “Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.”

This statement is not a visible, empirical truth. But, as Christians, we say it is not *yet* an empirical truth. We have confidence that God's design for us does not lead into darkness but into a new heaven and a new earth. Our Lord Jesus Christ cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – just as the Ukrainians whose homes are being destroyed by Russian bombs are crying out today; just as the Russian mothers who are receiving the bodies of their sons killed in this war are crying out; and just as the mother in Northern Kenya who sees her child die of thirst is crying out.

Why, despite this, do we dare to repeat the phrase, “Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity”? The answer is clear: we have been repeating it and we repeat

it today because we are deeply convinced that the realities of suffering we face are not God's last word, just as Jesus' cry of despair was not God's last word. Christ is risen. We believe this deeply in our hearts and souls.

We experienced in Karlsruhe that this confession of faith is not just empty words. In our worship, we experienced how the Holy Spirit brought us together as people from very different backgrounds and yet united us as sisters and brothers in Christ. In our discussions in the plenaries, in committees, and in the ecumenical conversations, we sometimes had to struggle to stay together or even to come together at all. However, the force of unity was stronger than the forces of division.²

For the future of the WCC, it will be decisive whether we succeed in communicating, living, and sharing beyond our own circles the vision of the unity of the churches that we experienced in Karlsruhe and its significance as a sign for the unity of the world.

An Ecumenism of the Heart as a Path to Unity

The path taken since the WCC's 10th Assembly in Busan

To make clear the path the WCC has taken in the years leading up to the assembly in Karlsruhe, let me recall the Unity Statement of the WCC's 10th Assembly in Busan, South Korea, in 2013. There, delegates from all over the world adopted a statement that breathed the very spirit that we in Germany then felt in so many places during our Reformation anniversary in 2017. As moderator of the group that had to introduce the statement to the assembly in Busan, I experienced the constructive spirit in which we worked together as representatives not only of Protestant and Orthodox churches, but also of the Roman Catholic Church. The document, adopted by the assembly without any dissenting votes, states,

Only as Christians are being reconciled and renewed by God's Spirit will the church bear authentic witness to the possibility of reconciled life for all people, for all creation . . . We affirm the place of the church in God's design and repent of the divisions among and within our churches, confessing with sorrow that our disunity undermines our witness to the good news of Jesus Christ and makes less credible our witness to that unity God desires for all. We confess our failures to do justice, to work for peace, and to sustain creation. Despite our failings, God is faithful and forgiving and continues to call us to unity. Having faith in God's creating and re-creating power, we long for the church

² See *Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: Report of the WCC 11th Assembly and Report on the Ecumenical Conversations at the WCC 11th Assembly* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2023), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/report-on-the-ecumenical-conversations-at-the-wcc-11th-assembly>.

to be foretaste, credible sign, and effective servant of the new life that God is offering to the world. It is in God, who beckons us to life in all its fullness, that joy, hope, and a passion for unity are renewed.³

These words are extremely significant. That our disunity undermines our witness to the good news of Jesus Christ and makes “less credible our witness to that unity God desires for all” is a diagnosis that speaks especially to the situation of Western societies, which are experiencing massive signs of secularization and whose religious institutions are losing their attractiveness.

That we have failed “to do justice, to work for peace, and to sustain creation,” that people do not really feel that we ourselves exude what we are saying, might also be an explanation for people losing attachment to the church. Credibility is perhaps the strongest element of the church’s missionary charisma. This is something I became aware of in recent years from a direction that one might not expect when one speaks of missionary outreach. I have never received so many emails, Facebook messages, or letters of support during my time as a bishop as I have since the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) decided to offer active support to civilian search and rescue missions to save the lives of refugees in the Mediterranean who are desperately trying to reach Europe. This decision was controversial. And it is something that can be debated. But it is interesting that so many people who previously felt rather distant from the church have since come forward with positive feedback.

I was surprised by this. But these people obviously feel that this commitment demonstrated credibility by the church to human beings and especially to those who are weakest. And it is true that if we really take the words of the Busan Unity Statement seriously, that we have failed “to do justice, to work for peace, and to sustain creation,” then we cannot do otherwise than draw consequences for our future action, however these fundamental consequences might be expressed in detail.

The experience of the Reformation anniversary

In our path from the Unity Statement in Busan to the Unity Statement from Karlsruhe, I need to make a stopover in 2017. For the first time in history since the Reformation, we celebrated the Reformation anniversary in 2017 not by trying to reinforce our identity as Protestants disparaging Catholics but in expressing our common ecumenical foundation in Christ.

³ “Unity Statement of the 10th Assembly: God’s Gift and Call to Unity – And Our Commitment,” in *Encountering the God of Life: Report of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, ed. Erlinda N. Senturias and Theodore A. Gill, Jr (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014), 37–41, at 49, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/report-of-the-wcc-10th-assembly>.

Two things we experienced in the ecumenical celebration of the Reformation commemoration were decisive in it becoming a signal for a new ecumenical dynamic. The first was the pain about the divisions that still exist between the churches, which we felt even more deeply as we grew together in our fellowship as human beings. And the second was the growing esteem that developed between us as we discovered each other's strengths once again. When I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2016 with the Council of the EKD and nine Catholic bishops, we celebrated worship in the Church of the Multiplication in Tabgha. While the Catholics were celebrating the eucharist, we Protestants had to remain seated. I found it really painful, and I think we all found it really painful, that we were not able to celebrate the Lord's supper together in this special place. From this experience developed a commitment that we should work even more passionately for the unity of the churches.

Just two weeks later, at the Common Ecumenical Prayer at Lund Cathedral, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and Pope Francis shared the following statement:

Many members of our communities yearn to receive the Eucharist at one table, as the concrete expression of full unity. We experience the pain of those who share their whole lives, but cannot share God's redeeming presence at the Eucharistic table. We acknowledge our joint pastoral responsibility to respond to the spiritual thirst and hunger of our people to be one in Christ. We long for this wound in the Body of Christ to be healed. This is the goal of our ecumenical endeavours, which we wish to advance, also by renewing our commitment to theological dialogue.⁴

And then, on 11 March 2017, we celebrated an ecumenical service for the "Healing of Memories" in the Michaeliskirche in Hildesheim, which was broadcast live on television. Many of us, me included, were greatly moved. I was particularly moved when Cardinal Reinhard Marx addressed the following words to me as a representative of the 21 million Protestant Christians in Germany:

We thank God for the spiritual, theological and ethical insights of the Reformation, which we can share in the Catholic Church. One is the valuing of God's Word and Holy Scripture. Another is the doctrine of justification: it is important for the Catholic Church, too, that a human being is justified not by works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. We see the commitment of so many men and women in Protestant congregations as a living witness to faith. We highly esteem the intensive discussions and responsible decision-making processes in your synods. We are impressed at the strong involvement of the Protestant church in diakonia, in our country and all over the world. We could

⁴ "Joint statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic–Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation," Lund, 31 October 2016, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/10/31/0783/01757.html#orig>.

name much more. Protestant sisters and brothers: we thank God for you and that you bear the name of Jesus Christ.⁵

For my part, I expressed our appreciation of our Catholic brothers and sisters in faith:

We thank God for the witness to faith of the Catholic Church. We see that it is a world church, in the true sense of the world, connecting nations, languages and cultures. With great respect we look at the love of liturgy nurtured in the Catholic Church. We highly esteem the special attention to the traditions of faith, confession and thought that have shaped the history of Christianity and hence our own history too. We know we are challenged to deepen our own understanding of the church and church unity, of ordination and ministry, in dialogue with Catholic theology. We are impressed by the charitable ministry of the Catholic Church in Germany and all over the world. We could name much more. Catholic brothers and sisters in faith: We thank God for you and that you bear the name of Jesus Christ.

The liturgy on which we based the Hildesheim service was later used by many congregations in services throughout Germany. I was touched by what I heard, and this strengthened my hope that the new ecumenical dynamic we experienced cannot be reversed. I was very pleased that, as a result of this year, after ups and downs and some concern about ecumenism coming again to a standstill, we were able to make it easier for those in interconfessional marriages to share the eucharist together. And the fact that mutual eucharistic hospitality was a possibility at the Ecumenical Kirchentag in Frankfurt in 2021, despite attempts from Rome to block it, is one of the consequences of the trust between the denominations in Germany that grew in the Reformation anniversary year.

What we experienced was an “ecumenism on the way together.” The journey continues. And I pray that the Holy Spirit will at the same time give us legs and the necessary tailwind.

The visit of Pope Francis to Geneva

In 2018, Pope Francis marked the 70th anniversary of the WCC with a special visit to Geneva. I was particularly encouraged by the homily that he gave in the chapel of the Ecumenical Centre. What unites us, the pope said, is much stronger than what divides us. Walking together ecumenically “in the eyes of the world, often means operating at a

⁵ These statements were contained in the liturgy developed for this service. See *Erinnerung heilen – Jesus Christus bezeugen: Ein gemeinsames Wort zum Jahr 2017*, Gemeinsame Texte 24 (Hannover: Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland; Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2016), 80; https://www.dbk-shop.de/de/publikationen/gemeinsame-texte/erinnerung-heilen-jesus-christus-bezeugen-ein-gemeinsames-wort-jahr-2017.html?dl_media=24609. [English translation from Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, “Address at the summer reception of the Institute for Confessional Studies (KI) on ‘Ecumenism,’ on September 3, 2019 in Bensheim,” EKD website, <https://www.ekd.de/en/summer-reception-of-the-institute-for-confessional-studies-1409.htm>.]

loss. Let us not be afraid to operate at a loss! Ecumenism is ‘a great enterprise operating at a loss’. But the loss is evangelical, reflecting the words of Jesus: ‘Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it’ (Lk 9:24).” Pope Francis continued,

After so many years of ecumenical commitment, on this seventieth anniversary of the World Council, let us ask the Spirit to strengthen our steps. All too easily we halt before our continuing differences; all too often we are blocked from the outset by a certain weariness and lack of enthusiasm. Our differences must not be excuses. Even now we can walk in the Spirit: we can pray, evangelize and serve together. This is possible and it is pleasing to God! Walking, praying and working together: this is the great path that we are called to follow today.⁶

From bilateral to multilateral ecumenism

The ecumenical journey of which Pope Francis speaks includes all church traditions. After the year 2017 it was important that we moved even more from bilateral Protestant–Catholic to multilateral ecumenism in the years that followed. And we have done so.

The assembly in Karlsruhe offered a great tailwind for this. The Free churches, the Pentecostals, and the migrant churches, which have so far been on the fringes of ecumenism, need to become more visible as part of the ecumenical fellowship. I experienced multilateral ecumenism very directly when I moderated the thematic plenary on the unity of the churches at the assembly in Karlsruhe. After a strong address by Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, we heard the diagnoses and visions for the unity of the churches from seven people with very different church and cultural backgrounds. We sensed what is described in the Unity Statement as the vision of an “ecumenism of the heart,” which transcends the official documents and lives out unity through intensive relationships at the local level. This brings me to the Unity Statement.

The Unity Statement from Karlsruhe and Its Vision

Repentance and self-critique

As in the Unity Statement from the assembly in Busan, the opening of the Karlsruhe statement is a call for repentance and self-critique by churches, not least given that the assembly theme was centred on love:

⁶ “Ecumenical Pilgrimage of His Holiness Francis to Geneva to Mark the 70th Anniversary of the Foundation of the World Council of Churches: Ecumenical Prayer, Address of His Holiness,” WCC Ecumenical Centre, 21 June 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco_20180621_preghiera-ecumenica-ginevra.html.

Referring to the ecumenical vision of Pope Benedict XVI, Berlin-based theologian Christoph Marksches has argued that it encourages us to reflect on an “ecumenism of profiles” without marginalizing the question of truth. One could, he wrote in *Herder-Korrespondenz*, be inspired by Benedict to “think about how an ecumenism can be thought and lived that is first and foremost oriented to the criterion of truth and does not marginalize theological differences as being irrelevant theories from gray, pre-modern times.”¹¹

Certainly, we should not marginalize theological differences and thus the search for truth. But for anyone who takes seriously the testimony of Christ and the love associated with it, the starting point for truth is the love we find in Jesus Christ. If we look at the concepts of love and truth, which are particularly important both to Benedict and to his successor Francis, we can see that Benedict tends to emphasize truth while Francis tends to emphasize love. This is highly relevant, for example, when we consider ecumenical questions such as being able to share in the Lord’s supper together. Do we need to settle all doctrinal and theological questions before we are able to share in the Lord’s supper together? Or do we say that our fellowship, love, and the relationship we have together means that we have to move forward? When Pope Francis was once asked in the Protestant congregation in Rome about progress on sharing in the Lord’s supper, he said, “Talk to the Lord and go forward.” Pope Benedict probably would not have put things in this way.

Looking at the biblical stories about Jesus and his words and actions, we see that Jesus never put the correctness of theological doctrines or adherence to predetermined rules above relationships. “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Let us come together in this spirit. Let us be thankful for all the church traditions from which we come. However, let us always be aware that these church traditions are never ends in themselves but serve as a doorway to Christ himself. And if we are in a relationship with Christ – in prayer, in reflection, and in action – we will always be in a relationship with our fellow human beings and, in a special way, with our sisters and brothers in Christ throughout the world. Therefore, it is intolerable when those who call themselves sisters and brothers in Christ belittle each other, spread hatred against each other, or even kill each other in war and through other forms of violence.

We can live out the mission of God only if we not only speak of the love of Jesus Christ but also radiate it in our own lives.

When Paul laments the divisions in the Corinthian church, he asks, “Has Christ been divided?” (1 Cor. 1:13). I want us as the WCC to give a clear answer: “No. Christ is not divided! Therefore, as followers of Christ, we will never accept that we are divided

¹¹ Christoph Marksches, “Eine platonische Beziehung,” *Herder-Korrespondenz* 2 (2023), 19–21, at 21.

among ourselves. We will give a witness of unity to the world and thus help the world to move toward greater unity!”

Mission as existence grounded in love

The vision of a fellowship of churches in which love leads us to unity has important consequences for the life and existence of this fellowship of churches. Indeed, if we wish to know how the church can gain new spiritual and new missionary radiance, the first thing to speak of is that which is inseparably linked to Jesus Christ as the centre of our faith: love. In short, the answer to the question about how the church can radiate a new charisma is to ground its existence in love.

If we ourselves radiate the love of which we speak, this is the best underpinning for people to become enthusiastic about the gospel. People themselves need to feel why this is such a wonderful message that we are sharing. They should not only hear it in what we say, but feel it in the way that we radiate it. Of course, this is not something that the church leadership can prescribe in a ten-point plan but is something that happens when we allow ourselves to be inspired by each other, inspired by our message and daring to share it: not something that is dull, oppressive, or legal, but simply being grounded in love. But this means that human beings are ends in themselves and not objects of potential conversion. Mission in the spirit of Jesus means loving the other for their own sake, just as Christ loves us for our own sake.

Ecumenical Public Theology

Faith and politics

Public theology is the attempt, in interdisciplinary exchange at universities and in critical dialogue with church and society, to offer guidance for basic social questions and, in so doing, to develop ways of communicating that make clear the relevance of religious perspectives for a pluralistic society.¹² The hallmark of public theology is its bilingualism. On the one hand, it gives an account of the biblical and theological roots of what we are saying. On the other hand, it implies that we state explicitly why what we are saying and affirming makes sense for all people of goodwill. Public theology needs therefore to master not only biblical and theological language but also the language of secular discourse and to attempt to make itself understood in philosophical, political, and economic debates.

In a passage in *Ethics*, which is also included in a modified form in his treatise “After Ten Years,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

¹² For my own account of public theology, see Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Liberation Theology for a Democratic Society: Essays in Public Theology*, collected by Michael Mädler and Andrea Wagner-Pinggéra (Zurich: Lit-Verlag, 2018).

The assembly strongly reiterated the condemnation of the war as “illegal and unjustifiable” that the WCC central committee issued at its meeting in June 2022 and that lamented the awful and continuing toll of deaths, destruction, and displacement, of destroyed relationships and ever more deeply entrenched antagonism between the people of the region, of escalating confrontation globally, of increased famine risk in food insecure regions of the world, of economic hardship, and of heightened social and political instability in many countries. “As Christians from different parts of the world,” the assembly stated, “we renew the call for an immediate ceasefire to stop the death and destruction, and for dialogue and negotiations to achieve a sustainable peace.”¹⁷

The statement also includes clear criticism of the misuse of religion to justify war: “We also strongly affirm the central committee’s declaration that war is incompatible with God’s very nature and will for humanity and against our fundamental Christian and ecumenical principles, and accordingly reject any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression and hatred.” Such clarity from the assembly was important and proved wrong all those who had shared concerns in advance that the Karlsruhe assembly would become a forum for the dissemination of Putin propaganda. None of this happened.

Integrity of creation

The assembly also made strong statements on the climate crisis.¹⁸ The statement adopted in Karlsruhe on “The Living Planet: Seeking a Just and Sustainable Global Community” was followed up by statement from the WCC executive committee in November 2022 on the 27th Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27) taking place in Sharm El-Sheikh at the same time as the executive committee had gathered together in Bossey near Geneva.¹⁹ The statement said that the executive committee shared the sense of urgency of the UN Secretary-General’s own impassioned words: “We are on a highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator. Our planet is fast approaching tipping points that will make climate chaos irreversible.”

¹⁷ “War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region,” 168.

¹⁸ “The Living Planet: Seeking a Just and Sustainable Global Community,” in *Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: Report of the WCC 11th Assembly*, 175–89.

¹⁹ “Statement on the 27th Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27),” WCC website, 12 November 2022, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-27th-conference-of-the-parties-of-the-un-framework-convention-on-climate-change-cop27>.

In support of the efforts being undertaken at COP 27, the WCC executive committee called on governments to deliver:

- More ambitious commitments and effective action, especially by countries with both the greatest historical responsibilities for climate change and the largest financial and technological capacities, to rapidly reverse the rate of greenhouse gas emissions;
- Sufficient, timely, and additional climate finance for vulnerable and developing countries to enable them to mitigate and adapt to climate change, especially in the agricultural sector;
- A “loss and damage” financing facility to compensate communities and countries on the frontline of climate impacts and to support their efforts in building resilience; and
- International cooperation to halt the expansion of fossil fuels now and manage a just transition away from coal, oil, and gas.

Conclusion

We can feel overwhelmed by the many challenges we face today, some of which I have outlined above. We often feel as if we don't know where to start. But as we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the inaugural assembly of the WCC, we need to recall that the world was struggling with global catastrophe 75 years ago, too. It was a world that had suffered 60 million dead in the Second World War and saw countless refugees needing housing and resettlement; a world that soon divided into opposing ideological camps threatening each other with total annihilation. Then, and many times since then, the WCC, through the faith, hope, and love of its member churches, ecumenical partners, and civil society allies, served as a crucial catalyst, advocate, and servant of all to help heal and reform the post-war world. Through the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity inaugurated at the WCC's 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, we pray that in these perilous times we may serve the world again. How we do so will test and define not only the next phase of the ecumenical movement but also, in important ways, the fate of our people and our planet.

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