

## The Oneness of the Ecumenical Movement

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Distinguished delegates, Sisters and Brothers in Christ, dear friends,

Thank you very much for inviting me to this august occasion of the 11<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the AACC to bring you greetings of the fellowship of member churches of the WCC and to speak about *The Oneness of the Ecumenical Movement*.

### 1. Belonging to one body of Christ in a broken and polarized world

Christians belong to the one body of Christ. Following Christ and proclaiming God's reign of justice and peace, we are called to be one in our diversity of traditions and contexts. This is what Jesus Christ prayed for. He will make us one in the power of the Holy Spirit - not for our own sake, but for the sake of the world that so desperately needs healing, reconciliation and lasting peace with justice.

"We are one church in South Sudan...In unity and purpose and faith in diversity, we are on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, fighting for a good purpose, for peace and for being together." Every time I am listening to the General Secretary of the South Sudan Council of Churches, Father James Oyet-Latansio, I am moved by such a strong affirmation of the oneness of the church. In the middle of violence, hunger and despair, people are longing for just peace. The church in South Sudan together with the member churches and partners of the AACC and the WCC, and also in close cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church, are amplifying the voice of the South Sudanese people on the African Continent and in other parts of the world.

The unity of the church is to pre-configure the unity of humankind and all creatures as a planetary community in its diversity. But surely there are polarizing factors and anti-ecumenical dynamics in and among the churches. The dominant thinking that guides people's action is based on the opposition of "us" and "them" in mutually exclusive ways. The ugly threats of racism and structural injustice con-

tinue to be divisive forces. Shall we be protective or even exclusive instead of embracing the diversity given by God and struggling together for justice and peace? The theme of your assembly has a clear response to this question: “Respecting the Dignity and God’s image in every human being” is an unambiguous message, saying “No” to racism and exploitation and “Yes” to the *ubuntu*-values of our shared humanity.

## **2. Moving forward together - on a pilgrimage of justice and peace**

At the same time, we see a way forward. There is a stronger momentum for moving together, as pilgrims, walking together, serving and praying for justice and peace as signs of God’s reign to come. The WCC has embarked on a pilgrimage of justice and peace, deepening unity on the way as disciples of Christ and strengthening cooperation in service and advocacy for justice, peace and human rights. The vision of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace speaks to the churches on their way together. It speaks to us as National and Regional Councils of Churches together with the WCC. It has implications for our relationships with ACT-Alliance, Mission bodies and other partners at different levels and in different contextual realities. Are we the prophetic sign and foretaste of one humanity and the unity of all creation that we are meant to be?

| A milestone of this journey together was the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in March this year in Arusha. It brought together sisters and brothers from a broad spectrum of Christian traditions and the different contexts of the world. The Arusha call renews the commitment for transformative discipleship following Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are also encouraged to move forward together by the different events that were organized to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WCC. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and Patriarch Ositelu of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) visited the WCC earlier this year. We celebrated together with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and received Pope Francis in Geneva who came as an ecumenical pilgrim.

Your assembly offers another unique opportunity to affirm our common witness and advocacy in the continent of Africa. Focusing on the dignity of human beings created in the image of God, requires that we are advocates for justice and peace for the African people not only at national and regional levels, but also internationally through and in cooperation with all of the member churches of the WCC.

### **3. The ecumenical movement of love**

When Jesus prayed for his disciples that they may be one so that the world may believe in Verse 21 of chapter 17 of the gospel according to John, he spoke of the mutual love in the Holy Trinity that now extends to his disciples “so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). Mutual love is the hallmark of discipleship. According to the second letter to the Corinthians chapter 5, the disciples are compelled by the love of Christ to be his ambassadors in the world engaged in his ministry of reconciliation.

Love is central to these Biblical texts and the entire message of the gospel. Reflecting on this insight, I dared to speak in my last report to the WCC’s Central Committee of the ecumenical movement of love. While some among us seem to be enthusiastic about the language of love and its emphasis on the quality of relationships with God and each other, other seem to be suspicious that it would weaken the sense of urgency in the struggle for justice and peace. I am afraid that in both cases, the rich and deeply transformative character of the Biblical message concerning the love of Christ might not yet be fully understood.

The church is invited to be one - as the Holy Trinity is one - in love. The church is called to be the expression of this love in a broken and sinful world. How could the ecumenical movement, trying to unite the churches in this call and to bring the signs of the reign of God - justice, peace and joy - into this world - how could this movement be something other than a movement of love?

Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:14: “For the love of Christ compels us” or, in another translation: “The love of Christ moves us on.” Cross and resurrection are central for the story of salvation in Christ as expressions of God’s divine love for all. The call to

unity and reconciliation, justice and peace, is driven by the one who died and was risen - so that those who live might no longer live for themselves. We are called to find the proper expression of the love given in Christ to us - in our way of living together.

The whole biblical story shows why human beings are in need of divine love, both individually and collectively. There is no reason to believe that we who are involved in the ecumenical movement are ourselves in any less need of divine grace and love. Driven by love for all, and particularly for those suffering, occupied, colonized, excluded, non-privileged, marginalized, discriminated against, the churches together in the WCC have spoken truth to power. We have challenged everybody who has responsibility for making decisions on behalf of many. It is in this perspective that we also should see a very important shared ecumenical theological point, "the preferential option for the poor." This axiom is expressing God's love for the world in a particularly profound and relevant way.

The attitude of love is more than softness and gentleness; it is the reliable and solid relationship in mutual accountability which allows also for expression of disagreement and differences for the sake of necessary clarity. Love means the ability to say both yes and no and to discern when to say which - even if it sometimes hurts, for a while for some, and even for those who have to say it. The question for all of us remains: How can we express more clearly the love of God for all human beings, regardless of who they are and to which community they belong?

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

Coming to my concluding remarks, I would like to take the opportunity to say a word of thanks and farewell to Rev. Dr André Karamaga, the AACCC General Secretary who led the organization with vision and great skills on its way from Kampala to Kigali. Dear André, I have always cherished your ecumenical commitment and deep theological knowledge and wisdom. Listening to you offered in so many ways precious insights and at times good advice. At the same time, I want to offer a warm welcome to the new General Secretary, Rev. Dr Fidon Mwombeki. Dear Fidon, we have seen each other growing in our responsibilities and tasks. I want to

assure you that I am open and ready for strengthening our cooperation in your new role as AACC General Secretary for the best of our member churches. Let's walk, pray and work together!