



World Council of Churches

General Secretariat

Postal address: P.O. Box 2100
CH-1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland
Visiting address: 150 route de Ferney
Phone: (+41-22) 791 61 11
Fax: (+41-22) 791 03 61
General e-mail: infowcc@wcc-coe.org
Website: www.wcc-coe.org

Direct dial: (+41-22) 791 6285
Direct e-mail: uz@wcc-coe.org
Direct fax: (+41-22) 791 6535

To:
WCC Member Churches
Members of Central Committee
Associate Councils
Christian World Communions
Regional Ecumenical Organizations
Specialized Ministries
International Ecumenical Organizations

Geneva, 20 March 2008

Dear friends,

Warm greetings to you this Easter Season in the name of our common Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen! May the light and joy of the Resurrection inspire our churches' witness to the world, fill our lives, and mark the nature and quality of our common ecumenical journey as we seek to fulfil together our common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This letter brings you information on the actions and decisions taken by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches which was held in Geneva from 13 – 20 February 2008.

At this second meeting after the 9th Assembly, the Central Committee:

- celebrated the Council's 60th anniversary;
- welcomed new member churches;
- affirmed the programmatic activities of the Council;
- chose the venue for the 2011 International Ecumenical Peace Convocation;
- achieved progress towards a broader WCC assembly;
- adopted a number of public statements;
- approved a new communication strategy;
- received the financial report; and
- appointed a search committee for a new general secretary.

Even this simple list of actions and decisions clearly indicates that this was an important meeting, and I hope that the summary information provided in this letter will receive your full attention.

I would welcome any questions, comments or responses from your side and will follow them up carefully with my colleagues.

60 years of fellowship

A festive celebration at Geneva's St. Pierre Cathedral marked the WCC's 60th anniversary, which is being celebrated this year under the theme "*Making a difference together*". Central Committee members, representatives of the local church, ecumenical partners and international guests gave thanks to God for the gift of a fellowship that has endured many challenges through six decades of existence.

Delivering the message of the day, His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, observed that this was "an anniversary that provides the

World Council of Churches, its member churches and its governing bodies with an opportunity to review the work done so far, but not only that. It also gives us, above all, a unique opportunity to turn together to the future and give new impetus, a new vision and a renewed mandate to this fellowship, which is what our sixty-year-old Council is". The Patriarch reminded the congregation that the WCC has provided "an ideal platform" for churches to engage in dialogue and promote Christian unity, as well as to respond to the needs of society. At the 60th anniversary celebration, the Ecumenical Patriarch suggested that in the context of a reconfigured ecumenical movement in the 21st century, the place for the WCC should be "at the centre of the life of the global ecumenical village".

His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew concluded his inspiring and encouraging message on a positive and confident note: "Let us then go forward with hope along the path that we have trodden these past 60 years".

Earlier, in welcoming the crowd to "this very special occasion in this very special place", WCC President from North America, Rev. Dr Bernice Powell Jackson, noted that the cathedral was an appropriate setting for marking the anniversary. It was, she said, "where the very first ecumenical service was held after World War II", in 1946.

The 90-minute service had an international flavour. The WCC's four working languages of English, French, German, and Spanish were all represented in music and word, plus there was a chorus in Greek, scripture readings in Swahili and Indonesian, and the upbeat music of the Valihan'i Jehovah Choir—a group from the ecumenical community of Madagascar based in Switzerland. Young adult stewards serving at the Central Committee provided leadership for the service.

The choir closed the service by singing the word "peace" in a variety of languages, concluding with the ringing of small cymbals. As guests exited, each received a small flower pot containing a candle "as symbols (that) we are carrying the seed of peace and also the light of Christ which illuminates the world".

Numerous other church leaders were present at the service, including Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity; the Venerable Colin Williams, general secretary of the Conference of European Churches; Rev. Dr Setri Nyomi, general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches; Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation; and other Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, ecumenical, and government officials.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary, a festive lunch gathered all participants in the Central Committee at the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey.

The 60th anniversary was also celebrated with explicit mention and through a series of reflective sessions dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and the 25th anniversary of the document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM).

The Central Committee received the Address of the Moderator and the Report of the General Secretary with appreciation, especially for their overview of the sixty years of our journey together, as well as insights shared and challenges raised. In light of the general secretary's emphasis on the changing ecclesial landscape, it was recommended that the WCC continue to monitor and analyze the changing landscape, and work with its ecumenical partners to develop greater clarity about the present and future role of the WCC within the wider ecumenical movement.

New member churches

Two churches from opposite sides of the globe were welcomed into full fellowship. The *Independent Presbyterian Church in Brazil* and the *Lao Evangelical Church* had been the first two churches to be received as members of the fellowship according to the new rule on membership adopted at the 9th Assembly in Porto Alegre in 2006.

The Central Committee welcomed very warmly representatives of the two churches who attended the meeting and participated in the festivities of the 60th anniversary.

With two new member churches, the total number of the WCC member churches was increased to 349.

Programmes

All the activities carried out in the Council's six programmatic areas were affirmed, even though further work on prioritization was requested. The Central Committee received with appreciation the reports of the consultative bodies and had extensive discussion on recommendations made. Amongst an important number of such detailed recommendations, the Central Committee asked that youth receive greater attention in all the programmes.

Recognizing the complexity of the Council's programmatic activities and the difficulties faced by its programme committee, the Central Committee instructed the programme committee core group, working with senior staff, to develop a more efficient and effective way of handling the programme committee's work, including: (a) a realistic methodology; (b) a way to provide information that entails *critical analysis* of the different proposals and clear proposals for discussion; (c) the production of documentation such as reports and programme plans that brings together information on achievements, objectives, activities, staff allocation, finances and funding sources for each project and programme areas; (d) a method of senior management handling reports from consultative bodies before the programme committee meeting that tests the programmatic and financial implications of their recommendations; and (e) joint work between its core group and the finance committee core group to work with staff on the priorities to be taken in developing the draft budget and list of activities 2009-2010, expecting to see a radically different procedure in place in time for the next Central Committee.

The 2011 International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC)

The Central Committee chose Kingston, Jamaica, as venue for the 2011 International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC). The IEPC will culminate the WCC's *Decade to Overcome Violence 2001-2010: Churches seeking reconciliation and peace*. Kingston was one of seven cities in the "Peace to the City" campaign that preceded the DOV emphasis. Also there have not been major ecumenical gatherings in the Caribbean region. It is expected that over 2,000 participants will get together under the theme "Glory to God and peace on earth". A series of "expert consultations" on a variety of peace and reconciliation-related topics are taking place as momentum builds toward the convocation. Five took place in 2007, and eight more are planned for this year.

Towards the 10th Assembly

The proposal, originating at the 9th Assembly in Porto Alegre, of an "expanded space" at the next WCC assembly was discussed and affirmed. A "discernment committee" was appointed to move the process forward. The goal is to provide for a broader participation of ecumenical partners and non-member churches, without compromising past achievements or the WCC identity and methodology.

The mandate of the discernment committee shall include: (a) exploring and making recommendations regarding the objectives of the next WCC assembly; (b) defining the objectives and nature of the expanded space; and (c) establishing the theological foundation for meeting these objectives. In its process, the discernment committee shall give consideration to the possible participation and role of other ecumenical partners, church groups and non-member churches and maintain a clear distinction between the governance aspects of the assembly on the one hand, primarily for the WCC but also for the CWCs and confessional families should they choose to use the "expanded space" provided in the assembly for their own governance purposes, and the celebratory and encounter elements of the assembly on the other hand. The discernment committee would also consider possible theological directions for the next assembly and report to the next Central Committee meeting in 2009.

The general secretary was commissioned to initiate the search for an adequate venue for the next assembly, scheduled for 2013. Therefore, we would be pleased and grateful to receive invitations from the member churches, in cooperation with associate councils, to host the forthcoming WCC assembly in late 2013. The ideal venue would accommodate in one central location no fewer than 7,000 people for daily prayer, provide meeting space for no fewer than 5,000 people, and provide plenary space for no fewer than 2,500. The churches offering to host the assembly should exhibit a strong ecumenical cooperation and be able to offer logistical support and ensure support through prayer. Invitations to host the assembly or consider a particular venue would be most welcome before 1 August 2008 so that they can be processed. You are kindly requested to address your invitation to the office of the general secretary.

Public issues

Seven statements and minutes on public issues were approved by the Central Committee:

- [Statement on democratic electoral processes](#). Affirming that "attention should be paid to pre- and post-electoral mechanisms" so that "an election truly reflects the will of the people", it calls on churches to be involved "in civil political engagement and education".
- [Statement on the crisis in Kenya and the churches' response](#). Addressing the violence that followed the recent presidential election, it recognizes that many Kenyan churches were affected by partisanship, but "affirms church leaders and members who became advocates for peace".
- [Statement on the crisis in Pakistan](#). Reviewing the country's troubled political history, it calls the outcome of the latest elections "encouraging". Hoping for a "return to democratic governance", it calls on churches "to continue to pray for peace and reconciliation in Pakistan".
- [Statement on cluster munitions](#). Recounting the deadly use of cluster weapons around the world and their effects on civilians, it condemns their use and lifts up the "Oslo Process" for negotiating a treaty against them.
- [Minute on the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip](#). It "calls urgently" for "an immediate lifting of the blockade of Gaza" and on member churches to pray for Gaza and to speak out on the situation.
- [Minute on our religious imperative to foster sensitivity and reconciliation in shifting society](#). It calls for mutual respect among people of different faiths, encouraging churches to model non-violent solutions wherever tensions arise.
- [Minute on global warming and climate change](#). As climate change effects are "being experienced already in many parts of the world", it affirms that "action must be taken now". Churches "can take key leadership roles", it says.
- [Recommendation on Kosovo](#). Recalling a "[Minute on Kosovo](#)" adopted at its September 2006 meeting, the Central Committee asked the general secretary to send a letter of support to the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church expressing affirmation of efforts towards peace.
- A "[Statement on eco-justice and ecological debt](#)" was discussed and will be referred to member churches for reflection and feedback. A revised draft will be considered at the next Central Committee meeting in September 2009.

The Central Committee received information on the WCC response to the letter from 138 Muslim scholars and noted that the WCC response is the initiation of a process of response and not another letter. Kindly find attached a copy of the commentary on the Muslim letter, which also describes this process, for your appropriate use in this new opportunity for dialogue with Muslims (see Encl.).

It should probably be noted here that Rev. Bondevik, moderator of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), wanted to see the Council's public statements carry a distinctly religious tone. An ordained Lutheran minister who served as prime minister of Norway from 1997 to 2000 and again from 2001 to 2005, Rev. Bondevik sometimes found himself having to explain to government colleagues why the churches

would be engaged in a certain issue. Thus in a plenary session of the Central Committee he applauded the proposed statements for "being grounded in scripture". "The church must not act like another NGO (non-governmental organization)", Rev. Bondevik stated. "We have value when we make public statements as a church, but we must always try to root our statements in these (Christian) values." "It is out of my experience as a politician for many years", explained Rev. Bondevik, "I have seen this from the political side, receiving so many statements from churches. I appreciated getting these statements, but we asked, 'Why are they saying this as a church? These could have been made by any group' ".

Communication

The Central Committee approved a new communication strategy aimed at strengthening the WCC "overall profile and image" and by developing a "focused message".

The Central Committee affirmed that (a) linking communication work more closely with fundraising, (b) building internal and external communication skills among staff and among the WCC officers, presidents and Central Committee, (c) providing WCC programme areas with strategic communication planning, (d) developing advocacy communication, and (e) improving communication impact and reach with WCC member churches, should constitute the main components of the 5-year strategic plan.

As an integral part of this communication strategy, all WCC member churches with websites will soon be formally invited to provide a link from their website to the WCC website.

Finances

The Central Committee heard that the Council's 2008 budget is balanced, with a total expenditure of CHF 42 million and a total income of CHF 39.51 million – the difference being covered by accumulated programme funds.

The Central Committee required that a conservative scenario be used as a basis for developing the draft budget 2009. Additional expenditure should only be included if related income has been confirmed. It was also suggested from the perspective of the finance committee that the finance committee core group should meet with the programme committee core group to guide staff on the priorities to be taken into account in developing the draft budget 2009 to be presented to the Executive Committee in September 2008.

Finally, a new income strategy for the Council was discussed and adopted. With general reserves close to CHF 10 million, the WCC income strategy focuses on its members' contributions, continued partnerships with specialized ministries, and development of foundations and individual donors. This strategy outlined five approaches.

Firstly, the membership campaign would be intensified, calling on the further involvement of Central Committee members. The objectives would be to improve communication with churches, in order to build commitment and meet the CHF 7 million goal. In 2007, membership contributions were still short of this target, at CHF 6.6 million.

The second approach in the strategy is to continue to strengthen the relationships with the specialized ministries through the annual round table meeting, and a programme of visits to the funding partners. The third approach recognizes the need for a focused effort to strengthen the fund-raising capacity of staff, and to work more closely with the communication team.

The fourth element of the strategy is to work with foundations. Following the specific contribution of a specialized ministry, there will be a new staff position dedicated to this aspect of the work. A fund-raising target of CHF 200,000 is to be achieved after the first full year of operation. The fifth strand of the strategy is the new focus on individual giving, which aims to increase the number of individuals participating from 400 to 1,000, raising the target to CHF 200,000 after the second year of operation.

Search for a new general secretary

Following my decision not to seek a second term in office for personal reasons, the Central Committee appointed a search committee in order to fill the position at its next meeting in September 2009. You will soon receive a letter announcing the beginning of the search process for a new general secretary, the timetable agreed by the Central Committee and the draft role description for the position. All member churches and ecumenical partners will be invited to actively participate in this process so vital for the future of the Council and the ecumenical movement.

I will remain in office until 31 December 2008. An interim general secretary will assume office as of 1 January 2009 until a new general secretary elected by the Central Committee at its meeting in September 2009 takes office, likely by the end of 2009.

In the course of my work as general secretary, I have visited many churches, ecumenical organizations and specialized ministries and endeavoured to spread ecumenical friendship and understanding to and among them. I have received strong support for which I thank you all most sincerely. Ecumenical ministry is my call and my vocation and I ask for your prayers in my discernment of my future involvement.

Documentation

The full text of all the actions taken by the Central Committee as well as the Moderator's Address and the General Secretary's Report are available on our web site www.oikoumene.org. Available on our website are also high resolution photos: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/photo-galleries/central-committee-2008>

With warm regards and best wishes for God's rich blessings in your ministry,

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia
General Secretary

Encl.

Learning to Explore Love Together – Suggestions to the Churches for Responding to “A Common Word”