



# Fifty Years World Council of Churches

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FIFTY YEARS AGO, ON 23 AUGUST 1948, THE FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE World Council of Churches at Amsterdam decided by way of accepting the Provisional Constitution to establish the World Council of Churches. In view of the destructions caused by the Second World War and the general sense of insecurity of the post-war period, the establishment of the World Council of Churches was greeted as a significant sign of hope. Archbishop Temple, the chair of the Provisional Committee of the "World Council in the Process of Formation," even referred to the ecumenical movement as the "great new fact of our era." It was hoped at the time that the coming together of the churches in the World Council of Churches might make a decisive contribution to the development of a new order of peace and justice. The theme of the First Assembly, "Man's Disorder and God's Design," echoes this hope. Throughout these past fifty years, the development of the World Council of Churches has been closely interwoven with the historical events in Europe and worldwide.

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*Throughout its fifty-year history, the World Council of Churches has functioned not primarily to represent the common interests of its members and carry out relevant programs, but to make visible the unity of the church that is given in Jesus Christ. Only that understanding of mission will enable the Council to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.*

## I.

In retrospect, one can ask how the history of the World Council would have developed without the experience of the Second World War, the church struggle in Germany, and the necessity to develop practical forms of ecumenical solidarity in helping refugees and assisting the process of reconstruction in a Europe ravaged by war. Particular mention must be made of the challenges regarding the very being of the church that emerged from the totalitarian structures of fascism, national socialism, and Stalinism, and that have contributed in a decisive way to deepening the ecclesial self-understanding of the World Council as a Council of Churches. While the council as an instrument of the ecumenical movement always retained the active orientation towards social responsibility, it was equally clear that the movement could remain viable and credible only if it became rooted in the life and self-understanding of the churches. The merger of the two movements—Life and Work, Faith and Order—in the establishment of the World Council served this very goal.

At the time of the official foundation of the council in 1948, the alliance of the big powers against Nazi Germany had already broken apart. In the course of the famous debate at Amsterdam between John Foster Dulles, later the American Secretary of State, and the Czech theologian and subsequent president of the Christian Peace Conference, Josef Hromadka, tensions clearly emerged. Soon after the first assembly these became firmly entrenched in the cold war. This meant that the hopes for a reconstruction of an international order of peace and justice, which had been kindled by the establishment of the United Nations and the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, had become unrealistic. The World Council of Churches had to accommodate itself to the fact that its efforts at fostering unity and cooperation between the churches had to be carried on during the first decades of its existence under the condition of an increasingly aggressive confrontation between east and west. In looking back today at the radical changes in central and eastern Europe, we slowly become aware of how deeply the discussions and initiatives in the context of the World Council have been shaped by the political conditions of this ideological, social, and especially military antagonism. Ever since the discussions during the first assembly at Amsterdam about the vision of a “responsible society”—Would that be *laissez-faire* capitalism or communism?—the World Council has continuously struggled to maintain its independence and integrity between these ideological frontlines, to avoid being co-opted by either of the two camps. Meanwhile, it has become a question for historical research to what extent the WCC succeeded and where it failed in these efforts. The results of such research might shed new light on decisive moments of reorientation in the work of the World Council of Churches.

The beginning of the process of decolonization opened a new phase in the development of the World Council. The process began in Asia, i.e., in India and Indonesia, and continued in Africa with the independence of Ghana in 1957. The Bandung Conference of 1955, which led to the formation of the Conference of

Non-Aligned States, marks the entry of the countries of the southern hemisphere onto the world political scene as actors in their own right. As a consequence of the movement toward independence from colonial rule, the churches in the southern countries, which had been the fruit of European and American mission, also gained their autonomy. When the World Council was formed in 1948, the 147 member churches included only a few churches from the southern hemisphere. Their links to the ecumenical movement had been maintained by the International Missionary Council. It was, therefore, a decisive step when—at the Third Assembly in 1961 at New Delhi—the International Missionary Council was integrated with the World Council of Churches. In the following period, more and more southern churches applied for membership in the World Council which thus truly became a *World Council of Churches*.

The proclamation of the First Development Decade and the establishment of the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development raised hopes for a speedy economic and social development of the former colonial territories. These hopes were, however, soon disappointed. In addition, Africa, Asia, and Latin America were drawn into the conflicts between the two superpowers which led to new tensions, in particular in Latin America and Southern Africa. In the 1960s, the emergence of liberation movements in Southern Africa and the hopes for revolutionary changes in Latin America began to have a strong influence on the ecumenical discussion. The Geneva Conference on Church and Society in 1966 became the symbol of this change of perspective in the work of the World Council of Churches. Until then, the churches in Europe and North America had dominated the formulation of the agenda of the WCC; from now on, the urgent concerns of the churches in the south moved to the foreground. While the concept of a “responsible society” was mainly oriented towards the maintenance of freedom and democratic order, the new perspective emphasized liberation, social justice, development, human rights, and human dignity.

During the 1970s, it was, therefore, the development conflict between north and south, between poor and rich countries, and the search for a more just international order that characterized the discussions in the World Council of Churches. When, at the beginning of the 1980s, the policies of *détente* ended and a new phase of the nuclear arms race began, the issue of world peace moved to the foreground again, and the conciliar process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation shaped the profile of the ecumenical movement in a very decisive way. Meanwhile, a radically new situation has emerged with the changes in central and eastern Europe and the ending of the cold war. From a global perspective, the changes in Europe have prepared the way for the process of globalization of economic and financial relationships. The World Council and the ecumenical movement are challenged by these developments to articulate and affirm afresh their vision of unity in the church and the human community—over against the unlimited dominance of the market that leads to growing marginalization and fragmentation. We are still at the beginning of this phase, but it is clear already that

the profile and orientation of the work of the World Council of Churches will change once again as we move into the twenty-first century.

## II.

The World Council of Churches is an instrument of the ecumenical movement, but it is not identical with it. This finds its clearest expression in the fact that the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the World Council, whereas it participates actively in the ecumenical movement. During the first half of this century and into the first decade of the life of the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church maintained an attitude of clear distance from the ecumenical movement. Nevertheless, unofficial encounters began to develop already in the course of the 1950s. When, in 1959, Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council, the World Council of Churches initially remained reserved. Soon, however, things began to develop very fast: representatives of the World Council and of its member churches were invited to participate in the Vatican Council as ecumenical observers; in turn, for the first time, Roman Catholic observers participated in a meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council, and Roman Catholic theologians were among the important speakers at the Fourth World Conference of Faith and Order. The Vatican Council had not yet ended when conversations about forms of closer cooperation began, which, in 1965, led to the establishment of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. This has remained until today the decisive link between the two bodies.

The rapid expansion of relationships and the hopes that this inspired encountered a severe setback when the Vatican declared, after having examined a study of the Joint Working Group about the possibility of membership, that the Roman Catholic Church would not in the near future pursue the option of membership in the World Council of Churches. While the reasons for this decision have never been officially explained, it became clear in the course of further developments that the Vatican had given priority to the development of bilateral relationships with the large confessional families.

Nevertheless, the Joint Working Group has continued its activities. In addition to furthering the cooperation between different sections of the World Council and Roman dicasteries, it has initiated and accompanied a number of basic study projects. These addressed fundamental ecclesiological issues like the understanding of catholicity and apostolicity, the relationship of the local and the universal church, or the question of the hierarchy of truths. Twice during this period, the Joint Working Group considered the question of common witness, and it has presented its own statement regarding a common confession of the apostolic faith. More recently, a document on ecumenical formation has emerged from this cooperation as well as a study document concerning ecumenical dialogue about ethical problems which are potentially church-dividing. The Roman Catholic Church participates through official representatives in the ongoing work of the Commission on Faith and Order; two Roman Catholic observers are regularly present at

meetings of the Central Committee, and for many years, the staff of the World Council has included two Roman Catholic colleagues in the field of mission and evangelism and in the Ecumenical Institute Bossey.

It is difficult to anticipate how the relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council might develop. It is very unlikely that the decision of the Vatican against direct membership in the World Council will undergo a change in the near future. On the world level, much more is at stake for the Roman Catholic Church ecclesologically and with regard to the understanding of the exercise of jurisdiction than on the regional or national levels. Even a reconstitution of the World Council of Churches on a new basis would hardly overcome this problem. The proposal has, therefore, been made that the large church families should use the year 2000 to commit themselves officially to a process that would open the way for a genuinely universal council. It remains to be seen whether the Roman Catholic Church will be prepared to enter into a discussion of this proposal or other suggestions regarding new ways of ecumenical organization. In any case, the forms of cooperation that have emerged over more than thirty years will continue to be cultivated and extended wherever possible, while both sides remain realistic about the objective limitations of their efforts at the present time.

### III.

In the perspective of its member churches, but equally of the general public, the profile of the WCC has often been shaped by those themes and issues that were at the center of the wider ecumenical discussion. Some of these themes are present in all phases, since they are closely linked to the self-understanding and the purpose of the World Council. This is true in particular for the continuing and varied discussion about the understanding of the unity of the church and about ways to reach the goal of visible unity. For the first time, the Third Assembly of the World Council in New Delhi in 1961 made the attempt to formulate the understanding of the unity we seek in a brief declaration that placed the main emphasis on the affirmation that all in each place who confess Christ and have been baptized in the name of the Triune God are being led by the Holy Spirit into a fully committed fellowship. This declaration initiated an intensive consideration of local ecumenism that has inspired the ecumenical discussion for a long time. The subsequent assembly in Uppsala in 1968 addressed the question of unity on the universal level and—for the first time—used the conciliar tradition of the ancient church as a key to the understanding of unity. This indication was developed further in the following years in the concept of the unity of the church as a “conciliar fellowship of local churches truly united”—adopted by the Fifth Assembly in Nairobi in 1975. Since then, the discussions about the unity of the church have been deepened through the convergence texts on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry as well as through the ecumenical explication of the apostolic faith as it is being confessed in the symbol of Nicea-Constantinople (381). In the light of these findings, and benefiting from the impulse of the many bilateral dialogues, the Seventh Assembly of the World Council in Canberra in 1991 adopted the, so far,

last official declaration of the World Council on the theme of unity under the title "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling." If there is one topic that has been present throughout the fifty years of the World Council of Churches, it is the theme of the unity of the church.

The questions of mission and contemporary evangelism have also found their place in the work of the World Council from the very beginning, and with the integration of the International Missionary Council they moved into the center of attention. While the discussion initially concerned the partnership of churches in mission in all six continents, towards the end of the 1960s the discussion began to focus on the relationship of mission and humanization or social development. The World Mission Conference in Bangkok in 1972 interpreted "Salvation Today" in the context of the struggles for liberation from unjust structures; this provoked strong criticism from churches and mission societies with an evangelical orientation. Ten years later, the World Council adopted an Ecumenical Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism that succeeded in building some first bridges across the dividing line separating the evangelical and the ecumenical movement. Since then, the two World Mission Conferences in San Antonio in 1989 and in Salvador de Bahia in 1996 have deepened mutual understanding and clearly demonstrated that, for the ecumenical movement, mission and evangelism are inseparable from the very being of the church. However, the understanding and the praxis of mission will have to address more deliberately the situation of religious plurality and the fact that the indigenization of the gospel in different cultures inevitably raises the question of dialogue with people of other faith traditions.

The important ecumenical debate concerning questions of social and political responsibility in a worldwide context has already been mentioned. Initially, the social-ethical debate concentrated on the concept of the "responsible society," whereas the practical initiatives of the World Council of Churches addressed the growing needs of interchurch aid, refugees, and world service. Already in 1954, a Secretariat for Racial and Ethnic Relations was established. In the course of the 1960s the issue of racism moved more and more into the foreground and finally found structured expression in 1969 in the form of the Programme to Combat Racism. This programme and the initiatives in the area of the churches' participation in development dominated the discussions on social and economic justice during the 1970s, while at the same time an intensive dialogue was initiated with scientists and technologists regarding the foundations of a sustainable social development. The concept of "sustainability" has, in fact, been introduced by the World Council into the discussion about structures of international order. In the 1980s, these various streams of discussion were brought together in the conciliar process on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation, which meanwhile has been pursued further in the search for a "theology of life." At the same time, earlier efforts continued that aimed at clarifying the question of how ecclesiology and ethics are related—the unity of the church and the commitment to social justice—in the understanding of the purposes of the ecumenical movement.

This brief sketch would be incomplete without a reference to the fact that the

World Council of Churches, very early on, addressed the question of the place of lay people in the church and in particular of the cooperation of women and men. In the 1970s, it was the extensive study on the "Community of Women and Men in the Church" which stimulated many churches to acknowledge the distinct contribution of women to the life of the church and the Christian community. Through the "Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women," the World Council of Churches has tried during the last ten years to make manifest the place and the voice of women in the life and structures of church and society. Undeniably, these efforts have led to tensions and conflicts, in particular regarding the admission of women to the ministry or the search for an inclusive language in liturgical or ecclesial texts. A World Council, however, which is committed to the search for the oneness of the church as an inclusive community cannot avoid these conflicts.

#### IV.

In the life of individual persons as well as of organizations and communities, jubilees offer an opportunity for grateful recollection and critical assessment, for a reaffirmation of the basic calling and the articulation of a vision for the future. The theme of the Eighth Assembly, which will take place in December 1998 in Harare, Zimbabwe ("Turn to God—Rejoice in Hope"), has been chosen to express this double impulse. The theme is intended to echo the biblical tradition of the jubilee year (Leviticus 25) as a year of liberation from burdens, the release of debts, and the restitution of the original property titles of the land as a foundation for a viable community. In his inaugural sermon at Nazareth, Jesus took up this ancient ordinance of the jubilee year (Luke 4:18ff.) and used it as a key to interpret his proclamation of the reign of God.

An ecumenical jubilee in the year 1998 or in the year 2000—this could become a source of inspiration for an ecumenical vision which leads beyond the turn of the millennium into the twenty-first century. If the churches truly were to respond to the invitation to be liberated and to turn together to God in Jesus Christ, they would experience the glorious liberty of the children of God and learn to recognize one another in a new community. The year 2000 would then not only be an opportunity for powerful efforts at evangelism, but an occasion to manifest the consciousness of the basic unity of the church that has been awakened again in the course of this century.

The history of the World Council of Churches during the last fifty years is, of course, far from being an unqualified success story. It is true that the World Council has contributed to the fact that the historic churches of the protestant and orthodox traditions, but increasingly also the evangelical and pentecostal communities, have developed a clear awareness of their relationship in the worldwide body of Christ. Through the efforts of the World Council, a worldwide network of ecumenical cooperation and solidarity in witness and service has emerged, and the voice of the Christian churches has been represented in the discussions about a more just and peaceful world order.

However, the sobering analysis of relationships with the Roman Catholic

Church has demonstrated that there are limitations to the comprehensive vocation of the World Council. Also, within and among the member churches of the World Council of Churches, new conflicts arise again and again with social, political, national, or ethnic root causes. These conflicts put the fellowship of the churches within the World Council to the test, as has been the case most recently with regard to the war in the former Yugoslavia. In fact, it should not be surprising that disputes and conflicts that threaten the coherence of human communities also find their expression in the relationship among the churches. But the World Council as a fellowship of churches is not simply an international NGO (non-governmental organization) that represents the common interests of its members and carries out relevant programs. Its primary purpose is to make visible the unity of the church that is given in Jesus Christ. In view of the increasing individualization and fragmentation that results from the global project of economic and financial integration, this calling is faced with new challenges that will only increase as we move into the twenty-first century.

In order to be able to respond to this task, the World Council of Churches has initiated among its member churches a process of reflection about a "Common Understanding of the World Council" and about a "Common Vision" of the ecumenical movement in the transition to the new millennium. It is the purpose of this process of reflection to clarify the specific task of the World Council within the diverse network of ecumenical partner organizations on the world, regional, and national levels, and to strengthen the commitment to the "one ecumenical movement."

This widespread discussion has led to the formulation of a policy document that was adopted by the Central Committee of the World Council at its last meeting in September 1997; this will be a basic working document for the discussions at the forthcoming assembly. The policy document interprets the World Council of Churches not so much as an international inter-church organization, but as a "fellowship of churches", i.e., a network of living relationships among its member churches. The organization and the structure of the World Council serve to deepen these relationships, and the churches themselves have to be considered the proper subjects of the World Council. This clarification of its self-understanding has implications for the institutional structure of the World Council, the forms of representation and participation of the member churches in the activities of the Council, as well as for the internal organization of its secretariat in Geneva.

The process of institutional change is still under way, and it is too early to anticipate its results. It involves not only the member churches and the governing bodies of the WCC, but also the most important partner organizations, including the Roman Catholic Church. The reassessment of the working styles of the Council has acquired additional urgency in view of the fact that the financial resources that have facilitated ecumenical work over these last decades are decreasing, not only on the global but also on the regional and national levels. The small number of churches and church agencies that so far have borne the main burden of providing the resources for ecumenical work are increasingly confronted with financial diffi-



culties. It will, therefore, be important to formulate clear priorities and to overcome heavy organizational patterns in favor of more flexibility and a more focused use of limited resources. This can only be successful if there is a clear understanding of goals and objectives, and this is precisely the purpose of the policy statement about a Common Understanding of the World Council.

At Harare in December 1998, the delegates of the member churches will affirm again the covenant that was established in Amsterdam in 1948. The mission of the World Council of Churches is not yet fulfilled after fifty years. In view of the challenges of the twenty-first century, it has gained greater urgency. In its message, the First Assembly in Amsterdam declared: "Here at Amsterdam we have committed ourselves afresh to Him, and have covenanted with one another in constituting this World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together. We call upon Christian congregations everywhere to endorse and fulfill this covenant in their relations with one another. In thankfulness to God, we commit the future to Him." This remains valid also for the Eighth Assembly at Harare. ⊕