

QUEENSLAND CHURCHES TOGETHER
ANNUAL MEETING
23² OCTOBER 2022

**REPORT ON WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES 11TH ASSEMBLY,
SEPTEMBER 2022, KARLSRUHE, GERMANY**

BACKGROUND

1. In 1938 Church leaders representing more than 100 churches voted to found a "fellowship of churches", which became the World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC now has over 350 member churches who together represent more than half a billion Christians around the world. WCC member churches are in all regions of the world and include most of the world's Orthodox churches (Eastern and Oriental), as well as African Instituted, Anglican, Assyrian, Baptist, Evangelical, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Moravian, Old-Catholic, Pentecostal, Reformed, United/Uniting and Free/Independent churches, Disciples of Christ and Friends (Quakers). The WCC Assembly is the highest governing body of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and meets every eight years.
2. In 2022 the 11th Assembly of the WCC (**the Assembly**) was convened in Karlsruhe, Germany at the joint invitation of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the Protestant Church in Baden, the Council of Churches in Germany, the Union of Protestant Churches in Alsace and Lorraine (UEPAL), and the Protestant Church in Switzerland. The theme of the Assembly was 'Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity'. 120 countries were represented.
3. In total several thousand people participated in the 11th Assembly. Some 800 official delegates from WCC member churches participated in official decision-making sessions. Many more joined the Assembly as youth stewards, observers, advisers, and representatives of ecumenical bodies. Participants engaged in pre-assembly gatherings, side events, bible studies, worship and prayer services, plenary sessions, electives (ecumenical conversations) and in visits to local churches and ecumenical projects in Germany, France and Switzerland.

MAJOR ADDRESSES AND GREETINGS TO THE ASSEMBLY

Senior church and ecumenical leaders from around the world, German political and civic leaders and office-bearers of the WCC addressed the assembly in plenary. Their addresses can be viewed at the following links.

1. The Moderator of the WCC Central Committee, Dr Agnes Abuom, Anglican Church of Kenya
[Report of the Moderator to the WCC 11th Assembly | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
2. The Acting General Secretary, the Rev'd Prof Fr Ioan Sauca
[Report of the Acting General Secretary to the WCC 11th Assembly | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
3. [Message from the Ecumenical Youth Gathering at the WCC 11th Assembly | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
4. [Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby's address at the WCC 11th Assembly | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
5. [Greetings by Rabbi David Fox Sandmel to the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
6. [Address of Cardinal Kurt Koch, Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
7. [Greetings to the WCC 11th Assembly by bishop Olav Fykse Tveit, presiding bishop of the Church of Norway | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
8. [Rev. Dr Dagmar Pruin: The humanitarian response to war, refugees and migration | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
9. [Address of Dr Jørgen Skov Sørensen, general secretary of the Conference of European Churches | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
10. [Address of professor Dr Sergii Bortnyk, Ukrainian Orthodox Church | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
11. [Address of H.E. Archbishop Yevstratiy of Chernihiv and Nizhyn, Orthodox Church of Ukraine | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
12. [Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
13. [Greeting of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the WCC 11th Assembly | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
14. [German federal president Frank-Walter Steinmeier's address at the WCC 11th Assembly | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)

CONCERNS OF THE ASSEMBLY

Environmental concerns, the treatment of Indigenous peoples and places of conflict around the world were key concerns of the Assembly. The Assembly's theme was often referred to in the context of difficult dialogue around issues such the war in Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East.

PUBLIC STATEMENTS

Core 'business' of the Assembly was to consider a number of 'Statements' on major issues proposed to plenary sessions by the Assembly's Public Issues Committee (on which Archbishop Aspinall served). Time did not allow all the proposed statements to be considered in plenary. Some were subsequently dealt with by the Central Committee.

Seven public statements were adopted either by the Assembly in plenary or subsequently by the Central Committee:

1. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-reconciliation-with-indigenous-peoples>
2. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-confronting-racism-and-xenophobia-overcoming-discrimination-ensuring-belonging>
3. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/war-in-ukraine-peace-and-justice-in-the-european-region>
4. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/seeking-justice-and-peace-for-all-in-the-middle-east>
5. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-living-planet-seeking-a-just-and-sustainable-global-community>
6. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/unity-statement-of-the-wcc-11th-assembly>
7. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-things-that-make-for-peace-moving-the-world-to-reconciliation-and-unity>

In addition, four briefer 'Minutes' were adopted by the Assembly:

1. [Minute on Syriac-Aramaic genocide "SAYFO" | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)

2. [Minute on consequences of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
3. [Minute on ending the war and building peace on the Korean Peninsula | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)
4. [Minute on the situation in West Papua | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)

In line with usual practice the 11th Assembly issued a 'Message' constituting 'A Call to Act Together':

[Message of the WCC 11th Assembly, "A Call to Act Together" | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)

NEW GENERAL SECRETARY

Present at the Assembly was the newly appointed General Secretary, the Rev'd Prof Dr Jerry Pillay. Appointed by the Central Committee in June 2022, will assume office on 1 January 2023. His experience and background includes:

- Born Durban, South Africa 1965
- Currently Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Praetoria
- 2009-2014 General Secretary Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa
- 2004-2006 Moderator of the General Assembly
- 1987-2009 various parish-based positions
- 1987-1989 part-time lecturing positions
- 2002 PhD 'The Church and Development in the new South Africa: Towards a Theology of Development.'
- Involvement in WCC Central Committee and other ecumenical bodies, local and international

Some Personal Reflections

1. It's an amazing privilege and a unique experience to attend a WCC Assembly. The diversity and energy and vibrancy of the worship, music, dancing, the range of spiritualities experienced, the evident scholarship brought to bear, the sheer faith and holiness of some people present, their courage and persistence and sense of hope

sustained in the face of difficulties we can't begin to imagine – all of that is truly inspiring.

It's not all like that though. It's hard work relating and communicating across cultural and language barriers. The 12 hour plus days in this kind of setting were demanding and tiring. Like all church gatherings it seems, a few people are besotted with the sound of their own voice and seem unable to contain the temptation to bestow the benefit of their views on every issue.

So while it's extraordinarily inspiring to be part of, it's not spared the frustrations of normal human frailties.

- a. Which such huge volumes of input and stimulation, on complex and nuanced issues, often with long and convoluted histories, it's easy to get indigestion and to give up on trying to take it all in and process it. The good news is it's all incredibly well documented on the WCC website so that the vast pool of resources generated by this and all assemblies remains available to feed reflection and to harvest for insights in the years and decades ahead.
2. There are always a few things that strike you as especially significant.
3. The WCC and its member churches have been extremely well served by the Acting General Secretary, The Rev'd Prof Fr Ioan Sauca, from the Romanian Orthodox Church. He's a great theologian and has wonderful interpersonal capacities to relate to others across all sorts of differences. On particular issues of great significance he spoke with clarity and force.

One example was when he addressed the war in Ukraine. There had been calls from various quarters, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, for the WCC to expel or suspend the Russian Orthodox Church from its membership because of Patriarch Kiril's perceived support for President Putin and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Prof Sauca had this to say:

44. War in Ukraine: This is an open wound in our world today. This war is in Europe, where our assembly is taking place, and since it has worldwide implications due to the nuclear threat and the food crisis that affects people in many parts of the world, I will reflect on it more extensively.

45. From the very beginning, the WCC condemned the war, called for an immediate end to armed hostilities, for the respect of international law, the sovereignty of Ukraine, and appealed for an immediate end to indiscriminate attacks that were having an increasing impact on civilians. The WCC was in the media spotlight since the first day of the war, and as of now, more than 7000 articles have mentioned the WCC in relation to the war.

46. The WCC in its response has been consistent in:

- denouncing violence as a solution to conflict
- calling for the protection of innocent and vulnerable people
- maintaining contact and dialogue with the churches in Russia and Ukraine
- engaging churches from the neighbouring countries in round-table dialogue
- advocating for humanitarian assistance with visible expressions of accompaniment in Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, and Russia

47. At each step, my prayer has been that the WCC can be a space for dialogue, for listening to and caring for one another, and for just peace and reconciliation. We can and must advocate alternatives to geopolitical so-called solutions that would deepen divisions.

48. During this time, we received letters and messages from individuals and three churches asking us to “expel” the Russian Orthodox Church from the fellowship of the WCC.

49. In consultation with the leadership of the central committee, I responded to such requests based on the history of the council when our fellowship was confronted with similar situations. The conclusion was clear in all cases: the WCC was created as an open platform for dialogue and encounter, for discussion and challenging one another on the path to unity. Unless it was because of the theological reasons mentioned in its basis, the WCC did not exclude anybody unless they excluded themselves. This was even the case with the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa, which supported and argued for apartheid theologically. This stance led to strong debates and condemnations from other WCC member churches, but, in the end, it was the church itself that “excluded” itself from the WCC as it felt it no longer belonged. It was not the WCC that suspended or excluded the DRC.

50. During its in-person meeting in June, the central committee debated at length the issue of the exclusion of the Russian Orthodox Church from the WCC. In its strong statement on the war in Ukraine, the central committee condemned the war and any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression, and reaffirmed the nature of the WCC as “a platform and safe space for encounter and dialogue in order to address the many pressing issues for the world and for the ecumenical movement arising from this conflict, and the obligation of its members to seek unity and together serve the world, and therefore urges members of the ecumenical fellowship in Russia and Ukraine to make use of this platform.”

51. The central committee unanimously rejected the proposal of exclusion and opted to continue the dialogue. In preparation for this assembly, the central committee asked “the Acting General Secretary to do all in his power for the forthcoming 11th WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe (31 August-8 September 2022) to contribute meaningfully to the search for peace through dialogue, for justice, human dignity and human rights – including by ensuring representation from Ukraine at the Assembly – and for the reconciliation and unity to which we are called by our Lord and Saviour Christ Jesus.”

52. A few weeks ago I made a five-day visit to Ukraine. We had to go by car for 1700 kilometres because there are no flights to Ukraine. We met people in the parishes, people caring for refugees and for those who are victims of the war, as well as the church leaders. Many said that we were the first high-level religious leaders who had visited them. We heard from the church leaders and state officials words of appreciation for the courageous WCC visit of solidarity and support in conditions of danger and insecurity. I am happy to report that as an outcome of that visit, there are 11 Ukrainians representing the major churches and the National Council of Churches who are with us. In the Europe plenary they will speak for themselves and to share the realities and the challenges of the situation and hopes for the future.

53. As followers of Christ, we were entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, and the theme of the WCC’s 11th Assembly reminds us all that the love of Christ moves the world to reconciliation and unity. It would be very easy to use the language of the politicians, but we are called to use the language of faith, of our faith. It is easy

to exclude, excommunicate, and demonize, but we are called as the WCC to offer a free and safe platform of encounter and dialogue, to meet and listen to one another even if and even when we disagree. This has always been the way of the WCC. I believe in the power of dialogue in the process toward reconciliation. Imposed peace is not peace; a lasting peace has to be a just peace. War cannot be just or holy; killing is killing, which must be avoided through dialogue and negotiations.

One more example of the clarity and compelling nature of Sauca's thinking about the ecumenical vocation and its significance today will suffice.

38. Human Sexuality: The topic of human sexuality is not new in the ecumenical movement and has been repeatedly discussed since the WCC's 3rd Assembly in New Delhi in 1961. What is new today is that after lengthy debate, we have now a study and resource document on "Conversations on the Pilgrim Way – Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality," which was received by the central committee in February 2022 and offered for further study and reflection to churches who are interested in it.

39. Still, this issue continues to divide churches and to create divisions within some confessional families. While some people advance theological arguments that support one position, others, using different theological arguments, deny it and reject it. We have to be clear: the WCC does not have a position or a policy on this issue as it is the churches themselves that have to debate it and arrive at a conclusion for themselves.

40. What we all can agree, however, is the need to respect the dignity of every human being, to defend and affirm human rights for all, to condemn any violence or verbal or physical aggression, and to affirm that every human being is created in God's image.

41. For some churches, even discussing this issue remains taboo and whenever a discussion on it is proposed, they get suspicious, fearing that the WCC may support one opinion or another, and may implement it as policy that is then translated into the programmatic work of the WCC. We heard such fears expressed once again during the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly meeting in Cyprus this year and I keep hearing the same concerns and worries from other churches, in particular from the global South.

42. Because of this, some churches are keeping their distance from the WCC, and some members threaten to leave it. The report of the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly meeting reiterated the WCC position and stance on such ethical dividing issues expressed in the 2002 Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC: “The Council cannot speak for, nor require the churches to adopt particular positions. It can, however, continue to provide opportunities for all churches to consult one another, and, wherever possible, for them to speak together. By the same token, member churches should understand that not all matters discussed within their fora can be imposed on the WCC agenda. Skill and sensitivity are needed on all sides to perceive which matters should remain within the counsels of particular churches and which can be profitably discussed together.”

43. My personal view is that even in this case we should do our best to maintain the WCC as an open and free space for dialogue on any topic with which our world is faced. But the WCC cannot, and should make it clear that will not, impose or take any stand on an ethical or faith matter that may divide the fellowship. We have to maintain the WCC as a world fellowship of churches.

These gems are just two of many you will find in the various addresses to the Assembly by church and ecumenical leaders from around the world. It's a rich compilation of resources that has the potential to inspire and re-energise ecumenical work for years to come.

4. One further related gem for me at the assembly was the ecumenical conversation on 'Moral Discernment in the Churches.' The WCC Faith and Order Commission over recent years has studied how various churches go about moral discernment. They have now published three short volumes with case studies showing how churches differ in their approaches, case studies on how individual churches' positions on moral issues have evolved over time (as in the case of usury, for example) and these volumes propose an analytical model for understanding the complex dynamics involved in moral discernment in churches. I think this work could be very important to the churches going forward. I note that an Australian Roman Catholic ethicist, theologian and philosopher, David Kirchhoffer, was a significant contributor to this work and the presentations at the Assembly. He's on our doorstep and we should

make good use of him. With his collaborators, he's keen to test their model in case studies with churches.

5. One final reflection, not from the assembly, but from the Anglican Orthodox theological dialogue that I attended in Athens last week. Metropolitan Athenagoras of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, several times quoted the words of Cardinal Mercier to the Malines Conversations in the 1920s, which set the dialogue ball rolling between Roman Catholics and Anglicans. Cardinal Mercier said a century ago:

In order to unite with one another,
we must first love one another;
in order to love one another,
we must first know one another;
in order to know one another,
we must first go and meet one another.

There's talk in some circles of an ecumenical winter, a loss of passion, energy and resolve about Christian unity. Perhaps that pessimism reflects nothing more than the fact that in the years since the 1920s, we've become so accustomed to meeting one another we've lost sight of the fact that that is the very means by which the Holy Spirit begins to transform us. Let us then not tire of meeting one another so that we can know one another, in order to love one another and eventually be united in that unity for which Christ himself prayed.