



For action

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SECRETARY

1. This report will focus on the period between the June 2024 executive committee meeting and the November 2024 meeting. The past five months, though including summer holidays in Europe, never really slowed down the work of the WCC. Detailed information has been already provided in the monthly Accountability Reports. Hence, this report to the executive committee will not go into full details but seek to highlight some of the activities and focus on some important areas in the life and work of the fellowship. The key objectives of the WCC as affirmed by the Assembly in Karlsruhe in 2022 will direct the contents of this report. The four objectives are: 1) strengthen the fellowship and deepen solidarity and community, 2) Witness together as transforming disciples, 3) Encourage spirituality, reflection and formation and, 4) foster innovative and inspiring communication.

2. As we gather here in Cyprus, we are thankful to the Church of Cyprus for hosting us and we express our sincere thanks and appreciation for their invitation and warm hospitality. The context in which we meet speaks of struggle and occupation over the past 50 years since the Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus in 1974. It is sad to note that attempts to address the issues to establish peace have not followed through since 2017. The WCC has stood in solidarity and support with the people of Cyprus over the years and our presence here in Cyprus at this time is a further expression of our continued concern, love and support.

3. As you know the WCC Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity is extended to everything we do in the work, witness and life of the council. Even our executive committee is shaped and designed as a pilgrimage encounter with our member churches and the context in which they are found. We have followed this model in Abuja, Colombia and now in Cyprus. In this context we will take time to understand the challenges of occupation in Cyprus and extend this into a broader context of conflicts and wars. In this meeting we will explore some of the global contexts suffering with occupation, conflicts and wars. The aim is to not only get information and insight into these contexts but to more specifically examine the role and witness of the churches in these situations.

4. Unfortunately, today churches are going through very challenging times as they oppose and/or support governments in their countries. The differences of approaches lend itself to conflicts within and among churches. While we know that politics is part of life and Christians should not extract or detach their witness from this, yet it is imperative for us to critically evaluate our levels and depth of involvement and association. In each context we need to ask: What would Jesus do? This may sound like a deeply spiritual questions and, perhaps, that is intended if we are to truly assess our words and deeds from the perspective of what the scriptures call us to do and be as Christians. In Cyprus, we will take time to reflect on this question and topic as we consider our conversations on occupation, conflicts and wars in the world. May we allow the Holy Spirit to guide our conversations and open our hearts and minds like Jesus did to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

FROM BOGOTA TO CYPRUS

5. The past five months since our executive committee meeting in Bogota, Colombia, has been busy as usual. I have continued with visits to important events in the life of our member churches, national council of churches, Church General Assemblies, and significant gatherings that required high level representation and input from the WCC. I had the pleasure and privilege to present keynote addresses, lectures, sermons, prayers and conversations about the work of WCC with many significant ecumenical partners and donors. I can truly say that though the travel time has been sacrificial for my family, it has really given credibility and new life and appreciation for the work of WCC. My focus has been to lift the profile of the WCC, and I believe that this is being achieved in major proportions. I am also grateful that many of the invitations that come my way are also graciously funded by the inviters and this certainly helps our budget constraints, especially when the requests for the general secretary's presence are so numerous. Personally, I greatly appreciate the interest and enthusiasm expressed in the WCC and would continue to encourage this because *presence* is important for relationship building and successful development of the fellowship.

Strengthening the fellowship and solidarity

6. In this section I offer some details of visits and activities undertaken to strengthen and deepen the solidarity with member churches, an essential objective of the WCC Strategic Plan. The recommendations from the June executive committee directed to the general secretary will be referred to either in this section or other relevant parts of the report.

7. I am grateful for the opportunity to visit Australia and the United States in June 2024. In Australia, I addressed the 11th Forum of the National Council of Churches in Australia, reflecting on the theme of the forum, "Christianity Matters." I preached a few times, delivered lectures and bible study, and met with leaders from all our member churches. I was greatly enthused by the ministry and witness of the NCCA and our member churches there. The serious attempts to remain relevant and meaningful in their Christian witness amidst numerous challenges is deeply inspiring. I am grateful for their generous and warm hospitality. I recently met the NCCA President, Rev John Gilmore, and he shared how the visit has strengthened their relationship with the WCC and inspired their witness in Australia.

8. In the United States, I attended the Presbyterian Church (USA) 226th General Assembly convening under the theme "Live into Hope" in Salt Lake City, Utah, from 29 June to 4 July but my stay there was short. It was such a joy and delight to preach at the Ecumenical Service, meet with the church leadership, member churches, international ecumenical guest and foundations to discuss fundraising possibilities. We thank God for the witness and ministry of the PC(USA) both in the USA and worldwide.

9. The WCC, accompanied by partners from the Middle East Council of Churches, ACT Alliance, and Caritas Internationalis, organized a digital ecumenical solidarity visit to the Holy Land held on 7-8 August. The intention to visit in person had to be postponed because of the escalation of violence in the region. Nevertheless, we pursued a two-day online solidarity visit with numerous people from Palestine. The visit served as an opportunity to accompany member churches and ecumenical partners, listen to their stories and perspectives, amplify their calls, and remind the world of what is needed to bring about peace in the region. The deep dialogue affirmed my belief that, as churches, we must be truthful, caring and prophetic.

10. In August I attended the World Methodist Council in Gothenburg, Sweden. I was given the opportunity to preach on the theme of the gathering, “On the Move,” which resonated fully with the WCC Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity. It was great to gain deeper understanding of the WMC and how they are addressing global and local issues. I was greatly inspired by their faithful witness. The opportunity to meet Methodists from all over the world and many other international ecumenical guests enhanced, strengthened and deepened their relationship with the fellowship.

11. The WCC also shared insights at the International Mission Partnership Consultation in Finland, hosted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The WCC heard updates from more than 40 partner churches and organizations, and together explored the theme “Your Will Be Done – Church and Mission in Changing Landscapes.” I was pleased to deliver the opening keynote address. Again, this visit gave us the opportunity to connect with member churches, ecumenical partners and funders.

South Korea

12. In September, I was privileged to present the keynote address at the centennial anniversary of the National Council of Churches in Korea and spoke at the General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church of Korea and the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea. The WCC deepened and affirmed its commitment and solidarity with our member churches and the people of South Korea on the pilgrimage of peace and unification of the Korean peninsula. This visit was very timely and significant seeing that the unification desire and process has been halted by both South and North Korean governments. I had the opportunity to meet with the prime minister of South Korea, Dr Han Duck-soo, we discussed critical issues: peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula, climate justice and sustainable development, humanitarian assistance to North Korea, and sanctions. It is envisaged that during 2025, efforts for engagement with KCF and other North Korean counterparts will be re-intensified, including especially regarding humanitarian and development cooperation.

Serbia

13. The ties between the WCC and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) were strengthened with a visit with His Holiness Patriarch Porfirije of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the Serbian Patriarchate in Belgrade. I was privileged to open a special exhibition titled “World Council of Churches and the Serbian Orthodox Church (1948-1991): Exhibition of Archival Materials.” We also met with representatives of the Protestant member churches in Serbia: The Slovak Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (SEC) and the Reformed Christian Church (RCC).

14. During the meeting, leaders from these churches shared their challenges and reaffirmed their commitment to the WCC’s mission. I expressed my gratitude for their continued witness and dedication to their work, encouraging them to remain steadfast in their vision of serving God despite the difficulties they face. We also discussed their interest in the WCC’s ongoing work. I emphasized our desire to support these churches in their engagement with our major initiatives.

15. A significant portion of the visit took place in Kosovo and Metohija, in response to concerns raised during the WCC General Assembly in 2022 and the Central Committee in 2023 regarding the volatile situation in the region and its impact on the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), and the request to the General Secretary to engage with the SOC and other churches and ecumenical partners in this regard. We visited several historical and religious sites, including the Serbian Orthodox Theological Seminary in Prizren and all the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Kosovo: The Church of the Mother of God of Ljeviš (in Prizren), Visoki Dečani Monastery, Peć Patriarchate Monastery, and

Gračanica Monastery. Our deep conversations with a number of church leaders, journalists and others identified ways in which the WCC could continue to journey with the churches in Serbia.

Lebanon

16. In response to Israel's attack on Lebanon, an online meeting was convened on 4 October by the WCC to express solidarity and support, and to provide a safe and constructive space for sharing, reflection, and discussion on the critical challenges currently facing Lebanon. The Middle East Council of Churches and ACT Alliance also participated in the virtual meeting. This Solidarity Visit was greatly welcomed and appreciated by our member churches and others in Lebanon. Though virtual platforms are not the best way to express solidarity and support yet it is highly appreciated by church leaders and community members as a medium to support people and member churches when visits are not possible.

Ukraine/Russia

17. Longstanding and intensive efforts by WCC to promote dialogue and encounter with the churches of Ukraine, Russia and other members of the ecumenical movement have so far met with limited success, due to the complicated and extremely pressurized context following the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

18. The June executive committee expressed concern about the Russian Orthodox Church's (ROC) support of the war as surfaced in the declaration of the World Russian People's Council. The general secretary reported that he had written to the ROC and shared their response with the executive committee. The executive committee approved the following recommendation:

The executive committee recommends that the matters of concern regarding the content of the Decree of the XXV World Russian People's Council and the relevant positions of the Russian Orthodox Church be entrusted to the general secretary for follow up as proposed in his letter to Patriarch Kirill.

19. The general secretary pursued this matter further after the June executive committee meeting requesting a visit to Patriarch Kirill. The ROC responded positively but asked for a pre-meeting with the WCC to discuss the request. We subsequently had an online meeting with Metropolitan Antony, Father Philaret and Father Mikhail. The meeting addressed some of the current issues, cleared the purpose of wanting to meet with Patriarch Kirill and agreed to continue working together on the issues discussed.

20. WCC has maintained contacts with both Orthodox churches in Ukraine and well as with the Russian Orthodox Church on this matter. WCC has also been paying attention to developments in Ukraine raising concerns for social cohesion and freedom of religion or belief. We continue to explore issues and modalities through which the WCC may serve the interests of peace and justice in this context. Further visits to Ukraine and to Moscow are anticipated. We were asked to delay our work for peace in Ukraine until after the USA elections. Now that has passed, we hope to continue WCC peace efforts in Ukraine and Russia.

21. The above information suffices to show how the WCC has been working to fulfil the objective of strengthening and deepening solidarity of the fellowship. Not recorded are the many statements and interventions undertaken to respond to violence, wars, floods, natural disasters, humanitarian concerns – all expressing support and solidarity of the WCC to member churches and others.

22. The fact of the matter is that we are living in very difficult times. Times that describe occupation, conflicts and wars. It is imperative that WCC continues to proclaim the message of peace and hope. Indeed, Jesus is our peace and hope. This is not only the message but the gift we can offer to the world. However, to do this successfully and credibly, member churches need to find one another, hold tight to the same gospel message of peace and truthfully proclaim Christ rather than be influenced by powers, authorities and political parties and leaders. Ultimately our allegiance and faith must be firmly and deeply planted in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Working Group on Palestine and Israel (WGPI)

This part of the report is for discussion and direction as part of the process to report to the central committee in June 2025.

23. This section is intended to report on work done by the WGPI, offers background information to the establishment of the working group, insight into the meeting in September, and recommendations that emerged from the WGPI. However, a more comprehensive report will be submitted to the central committee next June where formal decisions will be made on this subject. Since this proved to be a very controversial and sensitive subject at the 2022 WCC Assembly, I consider it important for the executive committee to start reflecting on and advising as to how we may proceed with this conversation leading to the central committee.

Background

24. At the 11th Assembly held in Karlsruhe, Germany in 2022, the WCC adopted a statement *Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East*. That statement said that

“...we **recognize** the threat to the future of the indigenous Christians and of all the people of the Middle East. We **affirm** that the best means of averting this threat is equal rights, inclusive citizenship, justice and dignity for all, without religious or racial discrimination. We **commit** to the guiding principles of “God’s justice and love for all of creation, the fundamental rights of all people, respect for human dignity, solidarity with the needy and dialogue with people of other faith” (CC Feb 2011) that remain the foundation of our ecumenical response to the region.”

25. The statement drew attention to the realities that challenge this vision; the continued displacement of Palestinian people from their homes, the expansion of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory and the escalation of violence in Gaza. It named the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories since 1967 as illegal. It affirmed that any resolution can only come by peaceful means in accordance with international law. The statement also affirmed the place of the state of Israel within the community of nations and, at the same, affirmed the right of Palestinians to self-determination. These affirmations found consensus. However, the statement also says:

“Recently, numerous international, Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations and legal bodies have published studies and reports describing the policies and actions of Israel as amounting to “apartheid” under international law. Within this Assembly, some churches and delegates strongly support the utilization of this term as accurately describing the reality of the people in Palestine/Israel and the position under international law, while others find it inappropriate, unhelpful and painful. We are not of one mind on this matter. We must continue to struggle with this issue, while we continue working together on this journey of justice and peace.”

26. In light of the failure to reach consensus on *this* matter, the Assembly called for the WCC to “examine, discuss and discern the implications of the recent reports by B’Tselem, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, and for its governing bodies to respond appropriately.” In addition, the Assembly called on the world ecumenical fellowship of churches to “consult and reflect on an alternative policy, perspective and comprehensive solution for Palestine/Israel where all people have equal rights before the law, as opposed to the current systems of control, exclusion and discrimination.”

27. In response to these calls from the Assembly, a working group on Palestine and Israel was elected at the 2024 June executive committee. The working group convened in Athens from 16-18 September 2024. It met, two years since the Assembly, in the aftermath of the events of the attacks by Hamas on 7 October 2023, and of the ensuing retaliation by the Israel government in Gaza, leading to the loss of tens of thousands of lives, including many children. On the final day of the meeting in Athens news came in of exploding pagers and phones in Lebanon, as a new phase of violence began to unfold.

Purpose of the Meeting – Terms of Reference

28. The purpose of the working group was defined as: to advise the general secretary on how best to address issues upon which the assembly had called for further reflection, namely the “apartheid” designation of Israel and its implications for the WCC’s overall position on the Palestine-Israel question.

29. The meeting gave extensive consideration and discussion on the use of the word apartheid`. In a summary of the three reports that had been made available to all participants beforehand, the following was presented:

30. Apartheid is defined, legally, as that which involves inhumane acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group over another, and systematically oppressing them.

Key points drawn from the three reports were as follows:

31. B’Tselem

- **Discriminatory Policies:** B’Tselem documents extensive discriminatory policies in areas such as citizenship, housing, land allocation, and freedom of movement.
- **Legal Framework:** It points to the Israeli legal system, which systematically privileges Jewish citizens while marginalizing Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians in Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).
- **Segregation:** Physical and legal separation between Jewish and Palestinian populations is enforced through various laws and practices, reinforcing a system of domination and control.

32. Human Rights Watch

- **Fragmentation:** HRW emphasizes the deliberate fragmentation of Palestinian communities, through laws & policies that segregate Palestinians in West Bank, Gaza Strip, & within Israel.
- **Land and Property:** It highlights discriminatory land policies, such as expropriation, denial of building permits, & the expansion of settlements, which disproportionately affect Palestinians.

- **Movement Restrictions:** It documents severe restrictions on Palestinian freedom of movement, including the use of checkpoints, the separation barrier, & military orders that limit travel between areas.
- **Civil Rights Violations:** The denial of basic civil rights to Palestinians, particularly in the OPT, is framed as part of a broader strategy to maintain domination.

33. Amnesty International

- **Systematic Oppression:** It documents broad range of oppressive policies, including denial of Palestinian refugees' right to return, discriminatory citizenship laws, & restrictions on family reunification.
- **Land and Housing:** The report details policies of land confiscation, home demolitions, & forced evictions that disproportionately target Palestinian communities, contributing to an overarching strategy of displacement.
- **Legal and Institutional Discrimination:** It points to the legal framework that enshrines Jewish superiority, including the 2018 Nation-State Law, which declares Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people and marginalizes non-Jewish citizens.
- **Economic and Social Control:** Disparities in access to resources, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians are highlighted as key components of the apartheid system.

34. The reports, as presented, from B'Tselem, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International provide evidence, it was argued, that Israeli laws, policies and practices towards Palestinians amount to apartheid. These reports have shifted the global discourse on Israel-Palestine, bringing the term "apartheid" into mainstream discussions about Israeli policies.

A different view

35. The presentation of a different perspective was offered within the framework of recognising that much has changed since the assembly in Karlsruhe, that all are searching for a way to find a just peace, and that there are many parallels between present-day Palestine/Israel and apartheid South Africa. The following arguments, in summary, were made.

- Despite parallels, there are some differences between apartheid South Africa and the situation in Palestine today. Some of those key differences might be obscured by using the word apartheid. For example, territorial and religious issues are at stake in Palestine/Israel. White supremacy is not the same as a Jewish state established to be a safe haven for a persecuted people.
- In the Middle East today there is not a simple, straightforward binary between victim and oppressor – here is a situation in which sometimes everyone is a victim, and one which embraces the whole of the Middle East. It would be better, rather than to label one conflict with a word from another, to use particular words for different conflicts.
- The word apartheid carries a huge weight and, though the state of Israel does commit crimes, it is not, in itself, an evil state. Not all Palestinians support the use of the word apartheid and it would not be right to use a term that risks dividing Palestinian opinion.
- Legal opinion is also not yet unambiguous or unanimous.
- What difference would it make to anyone if the WCC did take the decision to use the word apartheid in this context? It would have no positive effect and would damage a core role of the WCC which is to be 'open' and listening, including to the Jewish community. Christian antisemitism is still strong and needs to be addressed through open dialogue.

Recent and relevant developments in established international law:

36. The WGPI also discussed recent developments and findings established on international law. These are summarized below:

37. Apartheid in ICJ Advisory Opinion, 19 July 2024:

“The Court observes that Israel’s legislation and measures impose and serve to maintain a near-complete separation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem between the settler and Palestinian communities. For this reason, the Court considers that Israel’s legislation and measures constitute a breach of Article 3 of CERD.” [Article 3 of CERD: “States Parties particularly condemn racial segregation and apartheid and undertake to prevent, prohibit and eradicate all practices of this nature in territories under their jurisdiction.”]

The summary of the advisory opinion of 19 July with extended annexes (sent to all participants of the meeting) also includes the following statements from individual judges: e.g. that Israel’s discriminatory laws and measures in the OPT are ‘tantamount to the crime of apartheid’ (page 27) and that ‘Israel’s policies and practices in the OPT are in breach of the prohibition of racial segregation and apartheid; (p.31).

38. Self-determination in ICJ Advisory Opinion:

“As a consequence of Israel’s policies and practices, which span decades, the Palestinian people has been deprived of its right to self-determination over a long period, and further prolongation of these policies and practices undermines the exercise of this right in the future. For these reasons, the Court is of the view that Israel’s unlawful policies and practices are in breach of Israel’s obligation to respect the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.”

"The Court is of the view that occupation cannot be used in such a manner as to leave indefinitely the occupied population in a state of suspension and uncertainty, denying them their right to self-determination while integrating parts of their territory into the occupying Power’s own territory. The Court considers that the existence of the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination cannot be subject to conditions on the part of the occupying Power, in view of its character as an inalienable right.”

“With regard to the right to self-determination, the Court considers that, while it is for the General Assembly and the Security Council to pronounce on the modalities required to ensure an end to Israel’s illegal presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the full realization of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, all States must cooperate with the United Nations to put those modalities into effect.

39. Genocide in ICJ proceedings South Africa v. Israel

Prima facie jurisdiction: “At the present stage of the proceedings, the Court is not required to ascertain whether any violations of Israel’s obligations under the Genocide Convention have occurred. Such a finding could be made by the Court only at the stage of the examination of the merits of the present case. ...at the stage of making an order on a request for the indication of provisional measures, the Court’s task is to establish whether the acts

and omissions complained of by the applicant appear to be capable of falling within the provisions of the Genocide Convention ... In the Court's view, at least some of the acts and omissions alleged by South Africa to have been committed by Israel in Gaza appear to be capable of falling within the provisions of the Convention."

40. Israel's right of self-defence

It is often asserted that Israel has 'the right to defend itself'. But in international law no such right exists where the threat emanates from inside the territory controlled by the state. Israel, as the occupying power, cannot claim self-defence as a justification for launching military attacks in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, or the Golan Heights. Israel, from within its own territory, can lawfully repel any attacks to protect its civilians, but it cannot claim self-defence to wage war against the territories it occupies. Its principal obligation is to protect the occupied population. In doing so, an occupying power can undertake essential law enforcement functions (as distinct from military operations).

41. Palestinian right of resistance

Rooted in the UN Charter, in international humanitarian and human rights law, and affirmed by a series of UN resolutions, Palestinian resistance groups have a legal right to armed resistance to free the Palestinian people from foreign occupation, colonial domination, and apartheid.

The UN General Assembly has declared: "the inalienable right of...the Palestinian people and all peoples under foreign occupation and colonial domination to self-determination, national independence, territorial integrity, national unity and sovereignty without foreign interference" and has reaffirmed "the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for independence, territorial integrity, national unity and liberation from colonial domination, apartheid and foreign occupation by all available means, including armed struggle."

All resistance must respect the rules of humanitarian law, including the principle of distinction to spare civilians.

The WCC's response to these recent developments:

42. In January 2024 the General Secretary made a statement in response to the beginning of ICJ proceedings *South Africa v. Israel*, saying that the impact of Israeli military actions in Gaza demanded an urgent adjudication by the ICJ, and that such an adjudication should be respected by the international community.

43. In June 2024, the WCC Executive Committee made a statement on the escalating crisis in Gaza:

"The nature of the war, the enormity of the impacts on the people of Gaza, and statements made by Israeli leaders, have given rise to accusations of genocidal intent. As the WCC general secretary has asserted, those claims warrant adjudication by the relevant organs of international law, i.e. the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC)."

Way Forward: WCC Future Policy

44. Against the background of WCC solidarity with Palestinians, the documents requested for study on the use of the word apartheid, information on significant court findings and the lived experiences of people in Palestine and Israel, the WGPI have offered recommendations as to the way forward in relation to the recommendation from the WCC Assembly in 2022. The attached recommendations from that meeting speak for itself. Please take time to read and study the views expressed in that document. However, to summarize the following is given.

Apartheid

45. The WGPI gave a lot of time to discussion of the use of the word 'apartheid' to describe Israel's policies and this was, in some ways, the most contentious issue.

46. For some, the discussion about what vocabulary to use was simply an outrageous irrelevance, and there was frustration and anger that this was still an open question. When in fear of ethnic cleansing, and getting ready to flee for your life, how can anyone bear to be lectured on what terms to use for the situation they face? For many, the ICJ opinion or ruling (July 2024) should be enough.

47. For others there were important issues to consider, and these were expressed and heard. The arguments to not use the word apartheid were listed above.

48. Most of the participants advocated for adopting the terminology of apartheid in WCC policy. Some urged not only that it be judged appropriate, but rather essential, urgent and prophetic. Those who expressed concern about the use of the word, however, recognized the need for the WCC critically to engage with the reality on the ground and consider whether the current language adequately reflects the severity of the situation. If the word apartheid is to be used, it should be related to the court findings on international law.

Continued Solidarity with Palestinians

49. The WCC must remain steadfast in its commitment to the Palestinian people, particularly the Christian community in the Holy Land, who face increasing marginalization. This includes advocating for their right to worship freely and live in dignity in their homeland. Co-operation with the churches of the Middle East, the Middle East Council of Churches and other faith-based and civil society partners is crucial to working towards a just and sustainable peace in the region.

Calling to account

50. The WCC should urgently amplify its calls for an end to the occupation and for justice and peace in the region. This includes supporting international efforts to hold all parties accountable for violations of international law and human rights standards.

51. The WCC should engage with the broader ecumenical and interfaith community to promote a just peace based on equality, human dignity, and respect for international law.

Palestinian self-determination

52. It was clear that any talk of solutions must be grounded first in Palestinian self-determination. There was firm resistance to anything that sounded like a negotiated settlement between two sides (as though both parties must compromise). When the need is for the liberation of the oppressed, any talk of negotiation sounds like humiliation and compromise with oppression.

And yet, any peaceful future must surely be negotiated somehow.

Changing the narrative

53. There was a strong consensus that some of the languages need to change. The word apartheid should be used. Some language (like 'conflict') should be avoided because of what it hides. The phrase 'two state solution' has been used, for example, to hide the reality of occupation and obscures the true nature of the problem. If it is used it cannot be used to imply that there are two equal entities in search of a compromise.

Action

54. There was majority support for advocating and engaging in boycott, sanctions and divestment in relation to Israel.

Theology

55. There was a fear that many churches in the West have become 'soft Zionists' and that this needs to be addressed. The WCC has the potential to be a powerful voice in advocating for a theology that is rooted in sharing the land, that is God's, for all people with justice. The group did not have time to explore this in depth, but this would be a helpful way forward.

56. As indicated the above is offered as a summary, it is important though those full recommendations from the WGPI, attached to this report, be the guiding document on the way forward on the Palestine and Israel situation. I request the executive committee to carefully study that report and offer some directions that may assist the central committee in its consideration of the same.

General Secretary's remarks on WGPI Report

57. Whether we choose to use the word 'apartheid' or not, the matter of fact is that thousands of innocent people have lost their lives, properties, loved ones and livelihoods. The Church cannot remain silent or neutral in the face of mass killings and destruction. We are called to be prophetic and courageous, while seeking to embrace all the facts yet we should not choose to remain neutral. Sitting on the fence is not an option, especially when political authorities are powerless, complicit and impotent in finding solutions. The WCC has taken the route of dialogue and not violence in resolving conflicts. More so, in the context of war we need to stand up and be counted. While seeking to preserve the unity of the fellowship, the WCC must realize that we cannot do so at the expense of justice and prophetic witness. In the words of the Apostle Paul, we must learn to speak the truth in love: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." Ephesians 4:15-16.

Witnessing Together: WCC Programmes

58. This section highlights some of the activities and events undertaken in our programme areas since the last executive committee meeting in June. It is important to note that the programmes are aligned to the WCC objectives and priorities. Moreover, they communicate how the WCC continues to witness within the fellowship and beyond as we encourage transforming discipleship. Below I will outline some of the important work covered in the areas of UMEF, PWD and Communications to fulfil the WCC objective of witnessing together as transforming disciples.

Unity, Mission and Ecumenical Formation (UMEF)

59. In the period under review, the Unity Mission and Ecumenical Formation continued its work within its three strategic goals as follows:

Faith and Order

60. During the 2025 Ecumenical year, Faith and Order is collaborating effectively across WCC programmes, co-organizing an academic conference, exploring decolonial and womanist biblical perspectives, visible unity from an interreligious perspective, and with the youth programme. These collaborations will inform and culminate into the Sixth World Conference in October 2025.

61. Additionally, the Commission is organizing events and conferences with academic institutions and the member churches in order to promote and enhance the reception of its work. It is interesting to note the desire of many Church Communion/Confessions to be involved in the Nicaea 2025 conversations and celebrations. Of course, this is widely welcomed and encouraged.

World Mission and Evangelism

62. The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) programme in this period continues to focus on deepening our decolonial approaches and practices in mission. Our work on evangelism and discipleship has brought together practitioners in the Pacific to ask what evangelism and transforming discipleship looks like in the midst of climate injustice.

63. Ecumenical Disabilities Network (EDAN) has launched its 25th anniversary and challenges the WCC to deepen its solidarities with Public Witness and Diakonia (PWD) and opportunities for theological formation to develop the next generation of ecumenical disabilities theologians and leaders.

64. The Ecumenical Indigenous People's Network (EIPN) has drawn together its reference group to begin mapping out priorities ahead and incorporated a seminar on IP and climate.

Ecumenical Education and Formation

65. The Commission on Ecumenical Education and Formation (EEF) met for its first in-person meeting at Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea from 24-29 June 2024. The commission has defined clear directions for the focus of its future work: Working group 1 has been entrusted with the next Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI) and working group 2 with the development of an online course for an introduction to ecumenism – in collaboration with the Bossey faculty.

Young People's Engagement in the Ecumenical Movement

66. The commitment of the youth engagement desk to involve young people in all our programmes and activities continues. The ongoing pilgrimage to support and spearhead youth-led initiatives remains a priority for us. Plans for the first in-person meeting have yielded an in-person commission meeting that took place 13-18 November 2024 in collaboration with local Ecumenical partners.

Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation

67. The reference group held its first online meeting on 15 October 2024. It reaffirmed the strategic goal to engage in dialogue with partners of other faiths at the international level, to facilitate interreligious partnerships in all areas of the WCC's work. The new programme Executive, Dr Angeliki Ziaka took up the post in August.

Prayer Life

68. The spiritual life as it engages with the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity, has sought to ensure that the theme of the pilgrimage is interwoven into all of its programmes. Guided by the

theology of accompaniment module, the prayer life has sought to embody this through a process of intentionally engaging with member churches.

Public Witness and Diakonia (PWD)

69. This section of the report is organized around the PWD four core priorities and two cross-cutting themes outlining work covered during the period under review and some future activities.

PWD 1: Human Rights and Justice

70. *Global Advocacy:* The Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) has been actively working through thematic groups, covering issues of global governance, refugees, and human security. Planning has been underway for a major meeting in Athens in 2025 as part of the commemorations of the Stockholm Conference's centenary. In this context, digitization of significant historical materials is progressing, including potential partnerships for archival research.

71. *UN Engagement:* The Ecumenical Office to the United Nations (EOUN) has participated in key forums, including the 10th Annual Symposium on Religion's Role in International Affairs and the UN Summit of the Future. EOUN continues to engage in advocacy at UN events on issues such as women's rights, Indigenous issues, and climate justice. A structural review of WCC's UN representation is underway, with plans to establish it as a 501(c)(3) entity in the U.S. for fundraising and to improve its coordination role and profile in that space.

72. *Human Rights Initiatives:* Efforts have intensified to support churches in engaging with UN human rights mechanisms. Focus areas included environmental impacts, freedom of religion and belief (the survey is still to be completed), Indigenous rights, and women's health. Advocacy efforts, trainings, and publications highlight the role of faith in human rights frameworks, with country-specific trainings planned for 2025 in regions like West Papua.

73. *Climate Justice and Child Advocacy:* Marking ten years of partnership with UNICEF, the WCC has worked with various partners to address climate justice, violence against children, and rights protection. Resources have been produced to this effect. WCC's submission on climate disinformation led to the ICC developing a new policy on environmental crimes. At an upcoming global forum, WCC will engage religious leaders and youth on climate-responsive lifestyles. Resources are currently being developed on responsible banking and climate justice, including a handbook on climate litigation for churches. A recent grant from the FILE Foundation will support these efforts, with further funding opportunities anticipated in 2025.

PWD 2: Peace and Reconciliation Efforts

74. *Sudan:* Following the international ecumenical solidarity delegation to Port Sudan on 18-22 April 2024 (as reported in Bogota ExCom), consideration is being given to how WCC might be able to institute an ecumenical network or forum for Sudan (similar to the Ecumenical Network for South Sudan) to provide accompaniment and support to the churches and people of Sudan in bringing the conflict to an end and in reconstruction for a sustainable peace.

75. *Colombia:* WCC Special Envoy Humberto Shikiya continues to represent WCC in the peace processes in Colombia, as one of the Permanent Accompaniers of the Dialogue Table between the Colombian Government and the Estado Mayor Central of the FARC-EP. The dialogue between the Government and the ELN had been suspended, but efforts are being undertaken to put this dialogue process back on track. WCC is also being invited to consider engaging in dialogue processes with other armed actors in Colombia.

76. A new consortium formed between Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM), WCC, DiPaz (Interchurch Dialogue for Peace in Colombia) and Iglesia Evangélica Luterana de Colombia (IELCO) has been approved for substantial funding from the Finnish Government for an 18-month project period, which will provide resources for the core functions of the WCC Special Envoy's office. Further funding will however be needed for specific initiatives to enhance the impact of WCC's role in Colombia.

77. WCC is also in discussion with other partners, especially the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) Colombia, to develop cooperation for an 'environmental peace building' approach to the work for sustainable peace in Colombia. The CCIA Director will participate in part of the Biodiversity COP16 in Cali, Colombia, in order to develop contacts and discussions in this regard. We are thus pleased to report that with these developments the executive committee recommendations about securing funds and supporting the development of the peace process in Colombia is being attended to and yet more has to be done.

78. *Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine Israel:* The programme successfully expanded its accompaniment activities in January despite political challenges, focusing on Christian protection, including the Armenian community and Orthodox Seminary lands. There was a substantial increase in incident reporting, leading to more referrals for human rights support. Strong partnerships were maintained, with successful EU delegation visits, cooperation with Sabeel, Rabbis for Human Rights, and support for the olive harvest. Advocacy efforts included the creation of fact sheets, a lobbying consultant for an EU project, and a video on Jerusalem's freedom of worship. The EAPPI evaluation process began, and long-term funding agreements were renewed with DCA, EMW, and Swedish partners through 2024, with some NCs covering programme coordination costs even without sending Ecumenical Accompaniers.

79. *West Papua:* WCC has continued to monitor and advocate in relation to the human rights and humanitarian situation in West Papua (the Papuan provinces of Indonesia), especially in UN human rights forums and processes. A special priority has been given to providing human rights training to Papuan counterparts, especially women.

80. WCC has secured funding from Brot für die Welt for a two-year continuation of our work in this regard. This will also entail a role in convening civil society partners for enhanced coordination and impact of advocacy initiatives on the situation in West Papua.

81. In rounding up this section on peacebuilding, I remind you of the following recommendation approved at the last executive committee:

The executive committee asks the general secretary to call together a group composed of people from different backgrounds, with expertise and experience in peace building, to discern additional ways for the WCC to contribute to peace-making processes in the world.

82. I am pleased to report that significant conversations have been held with key organisations and individuals involved in peace-making initiatives. I am amazed how many different organisations are engaged with such processes. We are consolidating thoughts and discussions and would be in due course bringing together a group of people for more constructive conversations and direction on global peace initiatives.

PWD 3: Climate Justice and Sustainable Development

83. September marked the beginning of the Season of Creation, themed “To hope and act with creation,” which encouraged faith communities worldwide to engage in creation-centered worship and reflection. During the same period, the PWD3 team actively participated in the Human Rights Council’s 57th session in Geneva, where they organized side events addressing human rights in Brazil, non-economic climate impacts, and inclusive, sustainable development models.

84. In October, an Ecumenical Diakonia Reference Group met in Armenia to strengthen collaborative diaconal efforts, while an online workshop under the Women in Leadership Academy in the Asia-Pacific explored transformative leadership through gender justice. Additionally, ecumenical delegations attended critical conferences, including COP16 on biodiversity in Colombia and the upcoming COP29 on climate in Azerbaijan, underscoring a commitment to active ecumenical engagement in global environmental dialogues.

85. In response to the growing environmental crisis, WCC launched its “Living Planet Monitoring” publication series, starting with an issue focused on the impacts of climate change in South and East Africa. Additionally, WCC achieved accreditation to send an ecumenical delegation to the COP16 UNCCD conference in Riyadh, marking a milestone in its advocacy for environmental justice on a global platform.

86. As the PWD3 programme continues to advocate for a just and sustainable world, these diverse initiatives underscore WCC’s commitment to addressing interconnected challenges of climate change, economic justice, and ecological integrity from an ecumenical perspective, this programme envisages the launch of the Ecumenical Decade for Climate Justice Action, a Global Ecumenical Debt Jubilee Campaign, a liturgical Feast of Creation, and an advocacy campaign on ecocide and the rights of nature. Additionally, the consolidation of the Ecumenical Advocacy Programme on Land, Water, and Food Justice is viewed as an important direction in bringing together critical areas of sustainable development.

PWD 4: Health and Healing

87. *Faith and Science:* In October, the department facilitated a four-week online workshop on Faith and Genetics as a pilot for future courses. Additionally, a Zoom webinar panel was hosted on Theology and Artificial Intelligence, creating a space for dialogue on emerging intersections between faith and technology.

88. *Mental Health and Trauma Healing:* A series of workshops focusing on youth mental health was held in July at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s youth gathering in New Orleans, benefiting 660 participants. Additionally, from October 30 to November 2, training was provided for 483 youth leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia on mental health. On International Youth Day (August 10), the WCC commission released a message, A Call for Cross-Generational Action on Youth Mental Health, advocating for collaboration across generations. In observance of World Mental Health Day (October 10), the WCC launched the Campaign of Hope: Mental Health and Wellbeing for All.

89. *Human Dignity and Reproductive Health:* On Menstrual Hygiene Day (May 28), a webinar was organized to address menstrual taboos and highlight the importance of menstrual hygiene in faith communities. In August, the department held regional closed-door “Listening to Young People” sessions in East Africa, aiming to understand how youth navigate sexual and reproductive health challenges. Further sessions are planned for other regions.

90. *HIV and Pandemics*: Regional and national programmes addressing HIV and related pandemics were conducted in Barbados, Nigeria, Uganda, Malawi, Namibia, and Cambodia. In October, WCC released Good News about HIV Treatment, Cure, and Healing: Conversations between Faith Leaders and Communities in Nigeria, a discussion document fostering dialogue on HIV. In response to the Mpox outbreak, WCC informed member churches and the faith community with reliable information, issuing guidance and publishing a Q&A on faith communities' roles in response and advocacy.

T3: Just Community for Women and Men

91. This transversal focused on gender justice, reconciliation, and unity. It included advocacy training at the Human Rights Council, exhibitions celebrating women's justice leadership, and forums on faith and feminism. An upcoming Gender Justice Reference Group meeting in Zimbabwe and plans for the 2025 Nicaean Issue of IRM on gender will further deepen WCC's commitment to gender equity.

T6: Racism, Xenophobia, and Discrimination

92. In June 2024 executive committee asked the general secretary "to provide a clear and visible programmatic link between the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity and the discourse on de-colonization in order to provide programmatic coherence."

93. The following information on work on racism, xenophobia, and related forms of discrimination indicates some progressive steps in seeking to fulfil the recommendation approved at the previous executive committee:

94. The Staff Planning Days in October 2024 focused on anti-bias and anti-discrimination training. This was an important workshop helping staff to address their own challenges in these areas and gearing them to work on anti-racism and decolonization models in the work of WCC.

95. *Anti-Racist Churches*: Ecumenical Anti-Racism, Anti-Xenophobia, and Anti-Discrimination Contextual Bible Studies: This booklet offers adaptable Bible studies for addressing racism and xenophobia within churches and communities.

96. *Anti-Bias Churches*: An Ecumenical Anti-(Un)Conscious Bias Toolkit: This toolkit supports communities in addressing unconscious biases to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion. Both resources are available on oikoumene.org.

97. *Reference Group Meeting in Accra*: is planned for the 2-6 of December 2024 in Ghana. This in-person gathering will review 2024 progress and plan for 2025, with immersion activities that reflect on both historical and present realities. The programme includes a visit to a transatlantic slave trade site in Cape Coast.

98. *Wider Collaborative Efforts*: In line with the decolonization and reparations agenda, the transversal has engaged in consultations on the role of archives. Recent events include:

99. A German Federal Foreign Office-supported roundtable in Berlin (Oct 24-25) bringing together European and African Christian leaders.

100. A November consultation on the Bible and Decolonization in Cape Town with CWME.

101. An upcoming 140th-anniversary conference of the Berlin Conference, scheduled in Berlin from 17-21 May 2025.

Proposing a new name for PWD

102. With the upcoming centennial celebration of the 1925 Life and Work Conference in view, PWD has revisited the foundational tradition that has shaped its mission, aiming to realign with its original theological vision. Reflecting on this renewed commitment, the department is proposing the consideration of a new name for the Department, the *Department of Life, Justice, and Peace*.

103. It is felt that this new name more appropriately captures and describes the work of the WCC in the programmatic areas that constitute this Department. Apart from the more exact description it also links with the incredible work done by Life and Work in the past.

104. The new name embraces the past, present and future work of this Department. An attached document provides more insight and motivation for the proposed name change. However, it is not intended for any decision by this executive committee. It is offered to the executive committee for further discussion and processing to the central committee meeting in June 2025.

Foster innovative and inspiring communication

105. Since January 2024, there have been more than 500 news stories published on the WCC website and shared to the WCC media contacts and subscribers worldwide. On average, there are 50 news stories published per month, and 15 news stories per week. The WCC website, www.oikoumene.org, has been visited by 630,000 users since June 2024, which is 30% more attendance than in the same period last year.

106. Inclusive and accessible communications for all have been formally included in the strategic direction for all the organization's communication work and routinely integrated in WCC communication processes. A recent workshop with the WCC communications team, including specialized staff from the EDAN programme, looked further into this matter to ensure proper implementation.

107. The regional communication advisory group, originally formed to coordinate communications about COVID-19, continues its monthly meetings with communicators from around the globe. The implications of the current global crisis on communications are at the top of the agenda.

108. The World Council of Churches has increasingly focused on leveraging social media platforms to engage with youth, adopting a community-based approach rather than relying solely on traditional institutional communication methods. This shift is critical in fostering a deeper connection with younger audiences, encouraging active participation, and promoting a sense of ownership within the global Christian community. WCC Communication and the Youth Engagement worked together in publishing a second edition of the young people and their voices from the Warzones toolkit.

109. The move of the archives out of the Ecumenical Centre was delayed due to several practical issues, namely the configuration of the planned new storage room (narrow corridors and doors) and the impossibility of reusing the same shelves, as initially planned. The move had then to be put on hold when unsuitable conditions for the preservation of the archives in the cellar of the Kyoto building were observed (high levels of humidity). Alternative storage solutions that would offer

adequate preservation conditions to the archives and easier access to the movers are currently under consideration.

110. The migration of archival inventories from the outdated online system to a new one is progressing well. The first test migrations were performed during summer and the necessary adjustments made. It is expected to have the inventories back online by the end of the year.

111. In the period under review, WCC publications continued to publish reports, brochures, and books from various WCC programmatic areas of interest to the fellowship. Ten WCC publications and one co-publication have been added to the website. At least three other publications will likely be completed before the end of November. WCC publications can be downloaded for free.

112. In October, a reporting tool was implemented to gather data from various communication channels, including the website, social media, and email campaigns. The primary objective is to generate dashboards containing pre-defined tables, charts, and graphs, which are sent out regularly. This approach enables the communication department to swiftly assess the statistical performance of different communication items and establish performance targets and indicators. While the tool does not analyse the data itself, it provides a clear snapshot of the selected Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). This helps ensure that outcomes remain aligned with the WCC Communication strategy and that necessary adjustments can be made in a timely manner to enhance overall effectiveness.

Finance and Green Village

113. The WCC financial forecast for 2024 estimates total programme income at CHF 13.9 million, compared to the budget of CHF 14.4 million approved last November. The CHF 0.4 million decrease in programme income is primarily due to CHF 0.1 million negative foreign exchange rates resulting from a stronger Swiss franc, CHF 0.3 million lower contributions related to Syria, and CHF 0.5 million reduced contributions for Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme, EAPPI. This decrease was partially offset by CHF 0.3 million higher contributions in other areas.

114. Despite the pressure on programme membership and contributions, our strong focus on cost optimization enables us to forecast in 2024 a programme shortfall of CHF 241'000 which is very close to the CHF 209'000 deficit approved last December in Abuja. The key reasons for holding similar position as in the budget were the lower costs of CHF 0.4 million attributed to the redeployment and re-allocation of Geneva staff to the field and of CHF 0.1 million lower infrastructure costs. These lower expenditures were partially offset by once-off costs such as the IT cyberattack, an unexpected VAT charge for the past Assembly and higher depreciation.

115. Budget Planning for 2025 presents challenges financially. We are currently in the process to conclude the draft budget that will be presented for your approval in the executive committee meeting in Cyprus. The staff have worked and will continue to work closely in reducing the anticipated shortfall. The staff have put together a budget plan that bears risks, but we will continue to do our best to bring costs down. This is reflected in the 2026 budget plan.

116. I wish to also express my concern about future funding of the WCC. Some of our partners have alerted us to diminishing funds from governments and their regular sources. Declining membership and other factors are prompting member churches to restructure and minimize their financial contributions and, no doubt, this will impact on their additional financial contributions to the WCC.

117. The executive committee passed the following resolution in June:

- a. Acknowledges concerns about the financial situation and the risk of continuing to draw from the general reserves to support programme activities (2023 actuals, 2024 forecast, and 2025 framework).
- b. Requests the general secretary to ensure that planning will be focused on what is available in the budget and to prioritize on activities that can be self-funded.
- c. Asks the general secretary to explore and develop a strategy with a timeline for alternative resource mobilization and new funding models and framework towards financial sustainability, by the June 2025 central committee meeting.
- d. Reaffirms that any programme and staff adjustments will be made in accordance with the indicators of the Strategic Plan 2023-2030.

118. All these recommendations above are currently being worked on. As you know 2025 is designated as an Ecumenical year. The central committee and Faith and Order World Conference alone will require that we will need to raise around CHF 1.5m. We are trying our best to raise funds for the World Conference and so far, have reduced the budget and have received promises of financial contributions but these will not cover the full anticipated cost of almost CHF 800 000. I have clearly indicated to the organisers of the Conference that they will have to downsize their plans in accordance with what money is raised. The other option is to draw from the reserves, but we are trying to observe the recommendation of not drawing on the reserves as stipulated in the recommendation (a) above.

119. It is far more difficult to raise funds for the central committee which is expected to cost around CHF 700,000 but has an actual budget of CHF 300 000 meaning that we will have to raise a further CHF 400 000. If we are to address this shortfall, it will be necessary to request member churches that are financially capable to pay fully for their representatives to the central committee. We are thankful to those who do.

120. It is imperative that all delegates contribute to at least travel and visa costs where applicable. The WCC will try its best to cover the cost of accommodation and meals. This procedure of addressing costs of governance meetings would have to be a regular expectation. The WCC simply cannot afford to pay fully for delegates, it is no longer possible and sustainable given the financial constraints and the difficulty of raising funds for governance meetings.

121. I worked extensively with our staff leadership group to curtail expenditures. Recently they went through an exercise to reduce budgets and were directed to save unspent money during 2024 for their continued work in 2025. Travel duty days per year have been reduced, online meetings strongly encouraged, administration expenses reduced, and budgets strictly aligned to the WCC Strategic Plan. Further, declining income to the WCC would require an internal restructuring of WCC structures and programmes. I plan to begin such a process as soon as possible and report to the next executive committee and then to the central committee.

122. As already mentioned, 2025 is going to be a very expensive Special Ecumenical Year for the WCC. One of the measures of saving on expenses is to consider turning the November 2025

executive committee meeting into an online one instead of meeting in China, if we are not able to raise the needed funds. It is a matter for discussion.

123. I am currently working on bringing a group of volunteer fundraising experts together to think creatively about resource mobilization, fundraising models and frameworks for sustainable income generation. It is imperative that we think out of the box, so to speak, if we are to ensure the future financial sustainability of the WCC. We will report on this to the central committee in June 2025.

Green Village – for more information, please contact WCC Communication

Concluding remarks

132. We give thanks to God, the LCC for their leadership and WCC staff for the work undertaken in the period under review. We are grateful that despite the ongoing struggles of financial constraints, the challenges encountered in the Green Village Project and other difficulties that the council remains steadfast and firm in its work and witness to Jesus Christ in the world. Amidst the global challenges the WCC remains vigilant, firm and faithful in its witness. Our faith calls us to foster Christian unity and proclaim God`s justice in the world. May the WCC continue to make a difference in the world as we continue with the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity. To God be the glory!