



World Council of Churches

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ADDRESS AT THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CANADIAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

What is giving life to the one ecumenical movement in Canada and globally?

Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay
WCC General Secretary

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I am honored by your invitation to be with you on your special 80th Anniversary as the Canadian Council of Churches. We thank God for your remarkable history of service and impact not only in your country but in the world. We give thanks for all who have served the Council in the past and especially for those who lead today. May God continue to guide and prosper you in all his ways.

I am delighted to be given the opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts on the theme you have chosen: What is giving life to the one ecumenical movement in Canada and the World? It is, indeed, an appropriate theme as you celebrate this special anniversary.

I am going to try and answer this question in 5 specific ways as I reflect on ecumenical importance, ecumenical imperatives, ecumenical inclusions, ecumenical invitations and ecumenical inspirations. My hope is that these thoughts would further ignite and strengthen our passion for ecumenical involvement and engagement. I appreciate the reference to the one ecumenical movement, it is an expression and acknowledgement of the fact that we work and witness together no matter where in the world we may be, here in Canada, Geneva or Africa we are Christ's disciples in the world. So, let's get to the question: What is giving life to the one ecumenical movement?

In my presentation today, I will evoke our broadest context in the world and in the churches, then zero in on the ecumenical contribution—of which you are a vital part. Finally, I will indicate some recent learnings that might also inform or inspire your own collaborations to inspire positive change in your own context.

1. Ecumenical IMPORTANCE

In the first instance we must realise that it is God who gives life to the ecumenical movement. It is God who calls us to be disciples transforming the world and bringing it

into his own image and joy. The call of Jesus is that we may go and make disciples. Disciples who will transform and impact the world with his love, justice, peace and presence.

Ecumenism is described as God`s turning to the world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16) is an indication that God loves the world. God is keen to make the world a better place and God does that through God`s disciples.

God`s turning to the world is the mission of the church. This mission is the life beat that gives the ecumenical movement its joy and purpose. It is the basis of our theology and spirituality. It is what prompts us to transform the world around us so that the light of Christ may shine amid darkness, death and destruction.

Now while the calling of God is what gives life to the one ecumenical movement, it is also the global and local contexts that must prompt Christ`s disciples to serve as priests and prophets, offering care for the poor, suffering, neglected, oppressed and lost people in the world, and raising the prophetic voice against injustices. Creation is groaning.

The largest context and most pressing challenge for today`s ecumenical movement is the state of the *oikoumene*, the “whole inhabited world.” Today we live in difficult, even perilous, times, a time of crisis. Our current global context has been described by our most recent WCC assembly as a “polycrisis.” Five immense crises are, in our day, converging:

(1) *Accelerating climate change* threatens lives and livelihoods, wreaking havoc and even causing the extinction of species.

(2) *Increasing economic inequality*, the result of an unjust economic order, has left billions in poverty and stifled progress toward food security and global healthcare.

(3) We are also witnessing *a worldwide recession from the long held consensus about human rights*, threatening the dignity and legal status of religious and ethnic and sexual minorities.

(4) Likewise, we are recently undergoing *a crisis of governance*, through a retreat from and paralysis of democratic institutions, an advance of authoritarian regimes, the impotence of our international institutions to secure peace and well-being, the rise of mis- and disinformation in politics and media, stoking societal tensions and xenophobia.

(5) And finally, and most painfully, we are experiencing widespread and frequent *outbreaks of violence within countries and war between them*.

Today`s terrible and unnecessary wars are symptomatic of the whole polycrisis. We all know about Ukraine and Russia, and, since 7 October, the war between Israel and Hamas (a conflict with roots that go back to 1967 and even 1948). But there are dozens more wars and conflicts going on that don`t get much coverage.

These global trends, each of which engenders incalculable human suffering, are the broadest context in which Christians and Christian churches are living their ecumenical fellowship today. Their scale is global, their peril imminent, their solutions uncertain. They threaten the integrity of life on earth as we know it. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:22-24, “the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains.”

Canadian churches have played a significant role in the ecumenical movement and have contributed actively to the World Council of Churches (WCC). From the early 20th century, Canadian Christian communities, particularly the United, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches, were deeply invested in fostering unity among Christian denominations.

This commitment grew during and after World War II as Canadian churches recognized the need for collaborative approaches to global peace, social justice, and addressing issues like poverty and racism. The formation of the Canadian Council of Churches in 1944 exemplified this dedication to unity, becoming a platform for churches in Canada to engage in meaningful dialogue and shared advocacy.

The involvement of Canadian churches in the WCC reflects their commitment to global ecumenism. Your participation not only strengthened Canada’s role in global religious dialogues but also enriched the international ecumenical movement with insights rooted in Canada’s diverse, multicultural, and multidenominational context.

Walking with people and churches in Canada

In 2021, the WCC initiated a series of then called “Pilgrim Team Visits” to North America that held deep significance. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these visits took place online, yet they provided a valuable opportunity to engage with Canadian member churches and to hear powerful, unique stories around the themes of land and landlessness, truth and trauma, gender justice, and racial justice.

One such online visit focused on churches in Winnipeg, where participants engaged in a profound dialogue on the theme of “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.” Through this, our participants heard heart-wrenching accounts from families who continue to suffer from the violent disappearance of loved ones. We also learned of the tireless efforts by families and activists who have become advocates for justice—often stepping into roles traditionally filled by law enforcement and the judicial system—to ease their pain and prevent future violence.

The issue of residential schools for Indigenous children was also central to these discussions. Canada’s National Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported in 2015 on the physical, psychological, and sexual abuses Indigenous communities endured as part of this state-run system. Studies have shown that these experiences in residential schools contributed to widespread trauma, violence, and addiction among survivors. The Commission’s report also documented forced sterilizations of Indigenous women, a practice officially banned in 1973, though testimonies suggest cases continued afterward. Furthermore, the suicide rate among Indigenous youth remains five to seven times higher than the national average.

In the face of the climate crisis, we are increasingly turning to Indigenous Arctic wisdom. This perspective provides alternative insights, spiritual resources, and concrete practices to mitigate, adapt, and build resilience.

Severely threatened by climate change, Arctic communities stand as a prophetic witness to humanity's deep, inseparable bond with the rest of Creation. Their struggle reminds us of the urgent need to respect and protect the natural world as an integral part of our shared existence. The Arctic region is vitally important to Canada for environmental, economic, political, and social reasons. Although Indigenous leaders hold many local government roles, major decisions on resource extraction are often made in distant financial and corporate centers, with limited regard for Indigenous welfare and environmental sustainability. The legacy of colonization continues to cast a shadow over these communities.

Indigenous communities, particularly the Inuit, have lived in the Arctic for millennia, carrying a profound cultural heritage and traditional knowledge integral to Canada's identity. Protecting Indigenous rights and promoting sustainable development in the Arctic remain top priorities.

To sum up here, it is the call of God and the global and local contexts of struggles, sufferings and challenges that gives life to the one ecumenical movement. Out of these emerges what I refer to as ecumenical imperatives.

2. Ecumenical IMPERATIVES

What is giving life to the one ecumenical movement is the quest for Christian unity, justice, love and reconciliation and peace in the world.

Unity is indispensable: As we address the various conflicts and crises in the world, it is important for churches to seek unity and to work together. Apart from the fact that Jesus prayed for the unity of Christians so that the world may believe, global challenges warrant that we work together to heal, reconcile, and restore creation. The Christian voice for unity is not restricted to the church but to the unity of all humankind and indeed the unity of all creation. In this respect, unity and justice go together as two sides of a coin.

For seventy-five years, the vision of the WCC has been expressed as a commitment to *stay together, pray together, move together, and act together* as a fellowship of churches seeking visible unity and common witness. In its "Unity Statement," the 11th Assembly invited the churches to continue that unity:

We affirm the vision of the WCC for the visible unity of all Christians, and we invite other Christians to share this vision with us. We also invite all people of faith and goodwill to trust, with us, that a different world, a world respectful of the living earth, a world in which everyone has daily bread and life in abundance, a decolonized world, a more loving, harmonious, just, and peaceful world, is possible. In a world weighed down with so much pain, anguish, and fear, we believe that the love we have seen in Christ brings the liberating possibilities of joy, justice for all, and peace with the earth. Moved by the Holy Spirit, compelled by a vision of unity, we journey on together, resolved to practice Christ's love, following his steps as his disciples, and

carrying a torch for love in the world, trusting in the promise that Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.

It is clear from this statement that Christian unity is needed to witness to and transform the world as we address conflicts, divisions, brokenness, and pain. Christian disunity is nothing but a feeble, weak, and contradictory message to a fragmented world, while genuine Christian unity is a sign of hope to the world and a vocal testament to the power of love to heal, to reconcile, and to bring peace.

As you know, the WCC sees its work and the life of the churches as a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity. In our Pilgrimage, we unite our worldwide fellowship of churches not only around our shared Christian faith, which remains our vital centre, but also in the specific interests of justice, love, peace, and hope. That is faith's imperative and our clear vocation and God's mission in the world. It too can be an invaluable resource and source of inspiration for the churches and the ecumenical movement to build their ministries around these pressing gospel imperatives. Justice, reconciliation, and peace: They bolster Christianity's relevance and offers a message to the world directed to God, spirituality and humanity. They give impetus and life to the ecumenical movement. The longingness to see God's will done and God's kingdom come.

Justice: The cry for freedom and justice is loud for many in the world today. We are surrounded by the need for economic, gender, racial justice, climate justice and digital justice. God uses several instruments to reach and transform the world, including and especially the church. Therefore, the church needs to hear and respond to this painful cry. The mission of the church is to follow in the footsteps of proclaiming Christ's love to the world. The church needs to stand where God stands and not get mixed up with the rich and powerful. The language of love is best expressed in standing up for truth, siding with the poor and holding out hope amid injustices and sufferings. Together we can make a difference in the world. Together we can live and fulfil God's vision for the world. Together we can say Christianity matters.

Love and Reconciliation: The gospel imperatives of love and reconciliation gives life to the ecumenical movement. With all the suffering and pain in the world today, what the world needs is love. Properly understood and if practiced well, the Christian faith is the message of love. John 3:16 tells us that "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." God is love and those who love God must love others (1John 3:11-15). We live in a world full of hatred, and we hear hate speeches and witness racial and ethnic conflicts in so many different places.

There is so much of brokenness, pain and suffering in the world. What is the message of the church in such a context? How do we work toward healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation? In part based on my experience in South Africa, I believe that, following the example of Christ's love, churches ought to help people to be brought into spaces to forgive, be forgiven, and seek reconciliation. The love of Christ reconciles a lost and broken world, not only to God but to the whole creational order which is renewed by the sacrifice of Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5).

What happened at the WCC Assembly in 2022 in Karlsruhe? I think it is fair to say that, with its emphasis on the love of Christ and its fruits in justice, reconciliation, and unity, the assembly really nurtured “an ecumenism of the heart.” Love, our self-surrender to God in faith and our self-giving to our sisters and brothers in solidarity, is now firmly in the centre of our whole ecumenical endeavour. A deepening, global ecumenical spirituality was voiced in Karlsruhe in more Christocentric tones. As the Unity Statement adopted there proclaimed, “In a world like this, wounded by divisions, the churches are called to witness to the indestructible power of love to bring together and reconcile. Through the faith they proclaim in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the churches are called to bear a counter-cultural witness: the hope of unity, justice, and peace.”

The centrality of love, and our faith in its power to transform the world, was reaffirmed in the assembly’s closing message, entitled “A Call to Act Together”: “We will find a strength to act from a unity founded in Christ’s love, for it enables us to learn the things that make for peace, to transform division into reconciliation, and to work for the healing of our living planet,” and indeed all creation.

Peace: The gospel imperative of peace gives life and drive to the ecumenical movement. We have already mentioned that we live in very troubled times of raging violence, conflicts and wars. There seems to be no peace. Political leaders and countries believe that they can find solutions through violence. They are so mistaken. A culture of violence seems to pervade our world today. The WCC speaks against violence and calls for dialogue to resolve problems and conflicts.

The WCC has over the years worked for peace in the world. We spend a great amount of time, energy and money to work for peace. I went to Ukraine and Russia, to Israel and Palestine, Sudan and recently to Colombia, where we engaged with church leaders, politicians, presidents and other groups trying to work for peace. It is no easy task. Even churches express different views, we are too caught up in religious nationalism, often used as instruments of states and politicians whether rightly or not, that is not the matter. The truth is that if we are to truly follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace, then we must be peacemakers, peacebuilders, and peacekeepers. I have seen how churches are in disunity and discord with one another because they are influenced by politics rather than their faith. Admittedly, it is difficult to not be influenced by the realities and experiences of our times. But how can we allow God’s Word and Spirit to speak to us and to use us as Christians as instruments of justice, peace and reconciliation that leads us to unity? Christianity matters, because our Lord calls us to proclaim peace to the world. Yet there can be no peace without justice. Christians are called to work for just peace in the world. And this should be an inevitable part of the churches mission in the world.

The Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity thus reframes our historic commitments—to unity, public witness, and service—to meet head on the existential challenges we face today: to walk in this world in ways which make all things new. This sacred journey, in which churches around the world take up the concrete work of justice and peace, will direct and embody the life, witness, and programmatic work of the council over the coming years. It evokes and supports a theology of companionship that extends the reach and effectiveness of our ecumenical community, our public commitments, and our collaboration in service. The WCC wants to show up where the churches are. We want to walk and work and pray with them, to learn from them and be present everywhere that

there is evident need. As an organization, the WCC may not have the most financial resources, but through our fellowship we have access to the knowledge and creativity, dedication and faith of Christians all around the world.

A Christianity that matters must be guided by spirituality, renewal, impact and relevance. We must address the numerous challenges in our world, country, and context. Christians must work together for justice, love and peace as we proclaim the message of saving grace in the Jesus Christ to a broken and suffering world. Vital Christianity must speak of transformative discipleship, theological renewal, reforming churches, technological and digital integration if we want to reach young people, inspiring worship, relevant liturgy, interreligious dialogue and cooperation, decolonial imperatives, and Christian unity.

3. Ecumenical INCLUSION

The ecumenical movement has for long focused on the poor, neglected, marginalised and forsaken. In recent times there is a resurgence of new life and energy as we focus on including new voices in the ecumenical movement. The WCC is focusing on mission from the margins and in this we are working in more meaningful ways with Indigenous Peoples, People with Disabilities and Young People who have for long been excluded. These people are offering new insights and directions to the ecumenical movement. We are sharing and learning all the time leading to new developments and inspirations.

The focus on racism and decolonisation continues to inject new directions and trends in the ecumenical movement. Most contexts in the world are surrounded by racial and ethnic conflicts and getting to the roots causes of these and addressing them face-on has become a necessity for developing peaceful, safe, stable and secure societies. While more needs to be done in these areas, yet it is pleasing to note that new methodologies and interest in ecumenical work is gaining momentum from these areas that have been neglected or untouched for so long.

The awareness that we cannot tackle the global challenges by ourselves is attracting interest to strengthen ecumenical work and collaboration with NGO`s and other faiths. Such inclusions allow for greater impact and possibilities for transformation and mobilisation for change. These collaborations can give new life and energy to the ecumenical movement. The WCC is certainly doing this in our work in several areas, including climate justice, human rights, health and healing, just to name a few.

Formed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the WCC's perspectives and priorities were also marked from the outset by moral abhorrence at the suffering resulting from and atrocities perpetrated in that conflict. In response, the WCC committed itself to working for the development of international law, to promoting multilateral international cooperation, and to a holistic approach to seeking a sustainable global peace founded on justice and human rights, as we proclaim Jesus Christ to the world.

So, from the start the international ecumenical movement has envisioned a global influence and a geostrategic policy effect that built on denominational reconciliation and defusing the historical tensions among Christians and Christian bodies. In fact, the unity and well-being of all humankind has been a constant theme in ecumenical initiatives, and

Christian unity itself has been for the sake of the larger human good. Peace in the broadest sense has always been the ecumenical horizon.

4. Ecumenical INVITATIONS

What is giving life to the one ecumenical movement? I think the spirit of the ecumenical invitation for others to join in making the world a better place for all people and creation is drawing much traction. I might add that this often does not happen with ease but given the global challenges there is more openness to work with others. In the WCC we are seeing the openness of churches that previously would not associate with the ecumenical movement seek membership. As the ecumenical landscape is shifting, so is the desire of some Pentecostal and evangelical churches to join the ecumenical movement. They are coming to the realisation that global challenges require teamwork and synergy.

The creating of safe spaces for people to talk about their challenges, share their stories and life experiences brings new life to the ecumenical movement. I mentioned already about Youth, Indigenous Peoples and People with Disabilities. However, the issue of human sexuality still struggles to find space for open discussions and understanding.

The WCC Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity is an invitation.

5. Ecumenical INSPIRATIONS

Let me complete my address by referring to the ecumenical inspirations that give life to the one ecumenical movement. They are what the Apostle Paul refers to as the eschatological gifts of faith, hope and love.

In a world of struggle and suffering people lose faith in institutions, leaders, politicians, human beings and even in God. The ecumenical movement seeks to inspire faith. Faith in God which inspires faith in others. Faith to believe that amidst crises and challenges we can lift our eyes to the hills from whence cometh our help. Our help comes from the Lord.

What gives the ecumenical movement life is its ability to hold out hope. The hope that says that though things seem to fall apart, in Jesus the Father holds all things together both in heaven and on earth. It is this knowledge and assurance that gives us hope. Hope, Augustine said, has two twin sisters, anger and courage. Anger to say this is enough. It cannot go on and the courage to change it. The courage to be transforming disciples making a difference in the world.

Based on this hope, our public witness and advocacy for peace, justice, and reconciliation present a moral compass and call to conscience for the world. They demonstrate to everyone that life and love will triumph over death and greed. Embodying hope, these are the ways of peace, the ways of righteousness, the ways of living together as human beings sharing the same planet and serving each other as we serve God in the world

And, of course, as already said, God's love for us and the world continues to inspire and gives life to the ecumenical movement. This is God's world, God's creation. Let's work together to be a better place for all creation.

As you explore your role and possibilities as Canadian churches ecumenically engaged, I hope that these ideas and thoughts on what is giving life to the one ecumenical movement will prove helpful.

Thank you and God bless.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jerry Pillay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jerry" being more prominent than the last name "Pillay".

Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay
General Secretary
World Council of Churches