



WCC chief highlights continuing support for the Middle East and North Africa

The plight of Christian communities in the Middle East and North Africa, and the region as a whole, will continue to be a key focus for the World Council of Churches, WCC General Secretary the Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tveit affirmed at the end of the opening plenary of the 10th Assembly meeting in Busan, Republic of Korea.

The comment came in response to a question after his report to the Assembly, and included a reference to the MENA plenary that forms part of the gathering's work this week, which has brought together some 3,000 Christians and observers from across the world - as well as many thousands following the event digitally on Live Stream.

As the WCC Assembly 2013 kicks off, the MENA region remains a major challenge," he observed on social media. "The grassroots hope for prophetic courage and lateral thinking, not safe political platitudes."

Dr Tveit was positive about the prospects for the worldwide movement for Christian unity towards justice and peace in the world, despite what some commentators have seen as a decade or more of "ecumenical winter".

Amid dramatic events, injustices and crises in the world, God is offering a "new dawn" for the ecumenical movement, he declared.



Busan exhibition and conference centre

The General Secretary was reporting on the council's work over the last seven years. He welcomed the coming of this Assembly, which he expects to be an event of humility, honesty and hope.

Dr Tveit introduced participants to WCC

denominations and traditions around the world.

In his address, Dr Tveit expressed appreciation for the marked diversity of the WCC constituency. He said that churches have "gathered here from many places and cultures. With our diversity we bring stories, experiences, hopes, prayers and vision. We also bring our pain, our challenges, and our yearnings for justice and peace."

Making a reference to solidarity with peoples and churches in conflict areas, including the Middle East, Dr Tveit said,

"We are particularly called as a world community of Christians to be in solidarity" with those who live in the "lands where the history of our faith started and developed."

initiatives taken to strengthen the quest for Christian unity, Christian solidarity, promoting just peace, mission, advocacy in public witness and diakonia, ecumenical formation, fellowship of women and men, and spirituality of pilgrimage, among many other projects.

The Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the WCC, welcomes delegates to Busan. The theme of the WCC assembly is a prayer "God of life, lead us to justice and peace".

The world churches' chief spoke about the WCC's unique "added value", which he said derives from "churches' experience" contributing in diverse settings to the "understanding of human dignity, human rights, freedom of religion and peace".

He said that the WCC's presence among other international organisations in Geneva also represents the WCC's "added value" for church and society.

The WCC includes 345 member churches representing numerous Christian

"We think specifically of Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Palestine. With them, we believe that the way to peace is to move forward into a culture and practice of democracy and citizenship, with equal rights for all," said Dr Tveit.

"Christian solidarity cannot be exclusive," he added.

Dr Tveit also spoke about the assembly being held in Asia, which he called a "continent of growth".

He continued, "It is also a continent marked with many worries about protection of the life of human beings and nature, and many families who do not share the growth and hope of others."

He particularly addressed the situation of people in the divided Korean peninsula between the North and the South.

Since the last WCC assembly in Brazil, Dr Tveit said, many challenges have been addressed. Yet, he added, "It is quite remarkable that, even with fewer resources and many challenges, these years have also been a time of rich harvest.

He concluded by inviting the assembly participants to "journey together" for "just peace" so that the "pilgrimage can begin".

Archbishop Welby says it is a 'privilege' to be at the WCC Assembly

The Archbishop of Canterbury struck a note of humility and encouragement in his message to the tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches.

Archbishop Justin Welby, who is spiritual head of the Church of England and of the 78 million-strong global Anglican Communion, told the gathering in Busan, Republic of Korea: "It is a great privilege – more than I can express in words – for me to be here at the opening of the 10th Assembly.

"Ever since the first Assembly at Amsterdam in 1948, Archbishops of Canterbury have been present at Assemblies, a personal sign of how important the fellowship of churches has been, and still is, for Anglicans. As a result we have sometimes been uncomfortably challenged and even moved to reform ourselves. We have learned so much from our participation in the life of the

fellowship. We have made so many friends.

"Friendship is the seed bed in which unity, the visible unity of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church grows and flourishes.

Archbishop Welby continued: "This is my first Assembly. I am enjoying sense of wonder at my smallness, my tiny place among God's great Church, which draws together women and men, young and not so young, lay and ordained, from different continents and cultures and different ecclesial traditions.

"Being here together a fresh vision of that to which we are called. It is an opportunity



The Archbishop of Canterbury addresses delegates at the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, Republic of Korea

for genuine encounter, an opportunity to learn about one another and to learn from one another. We must learn to hear Christ through one another. We renew our commitment to the ecumenical journey and the ecumenical task. We need one another.

"We have travelled to this place praying, 'God of Life: Lead us to justice and peace.' Peace and justice begin with us

and God. When we are not at peace with God through Jesus Christ we cannot be peacemakers in the world. God calls us to be reconciled reconcilers, reconciled ourselves to God and to each other. Peace and justice become in us a cause for which any sacrifice is worthwhile when they are given birth in each of us and in the church by the Holy Spirit. For that reason we need to be seen again to be a people of prayer; faced with the God of peace and justice our hunger for unity grows, we are able to forgive and love one another with the love that God puts in our lives.

"It is God, who is the perfection of unity. In God is the one Father, the one Lord, the one Spirit, who in Christ draws us into unity with God and with one another (a paraphrase of Lambeth 1920).

"We are to be one, visibly one, so that the world may believe. We are to be one so that the Gospel we preach is not denied by the way we live in separation. We are to be one because we are more effective together than apart. We are to be one – one people worshipping one God Father, Son and Holy Spirit, eating and drinking around the One table of the Lord, for that is Jesus' prayer for his disciples, then and for us now.

"The fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches has helped us Anglicans to understand something of the unity that is God's gift and our calling. But so often we have made God's amazing and precious gift sound like an impoverished unity, the life of an inward-looking, self-absorbed community, only intent on self-preservation.

Only institutions that are willing to lose their lives for the sake of the good news, the gospel, and for Christ, will find the life God offers. As Anglicans, as the WCC, we must die to live.

"When we look to God our eyes are turned outwards to His world, and we hear again the command, as Pope Francis said, to be churchnewsireland@gmail.com

a poor church for the poor. The children of Christ act instinctively to love those who suffer, as He loves us. If justice faints, hope fades. But when justice is loved, and lived, the poor have hope and the whole world begins to sing. Our vision has to be of God and God's world and the Church made sense of in that perspective.

"The unity statement before this Assembly tries to capture this vision. To fulfil that vision we need a fresh confidence in the good news as the best way for every human being on the planet, a fresh Spirit of grace to one another, and a fresh commitment to sacrifice all in the name of Christ for unity that reveals Him. 'God of Life: lead us together in unity to justice and peace'," the Archbishop concluded.

Gathering seeks "God of life" amidst conflict and violence

The 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) has delved deeply into the question how, in a world faced with violence, conflict and discrimination, the "God of life" can lead people, communities and churches towards justice and peace.

The session on 31 October 2013, in Busan, Republic of Korea, began with greetings delivered by Chung Hong Won, Prime Minister of Korea, who stressed the significance of peace for Koreans.

It continued with critical theological reflections, presentations on HIV and AIDS, and a special report on the situation of churches in Egypt.

Michel Sidibé, executive director of UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, encouraged the churches to "protect the vulnerable".

While speaking about sexual minorities, sex workers and other vulnerable communities faced with the grave threat of the HIV pandemic, he outlined the need to challenge taboos which can be a hindrance in access to HIV prevention and health care services.

Sidibé said that HIV positive people in many societies do not know where to go, so they come to the churches and ask for compassion and support.

Duleep de Chickera, Anglican Bishop of Colombo, Sri Lanka, spoke on the concept of “victim theology”. In his reflection, using the context of his own country, he said that the WCC theme is “mother of all petitions” since the global fellowship of churches are to be sensitive to the plight of marginalised victims. He called the theme a “timely prophetic petition”.

A theology disconnected from victims or in support of war in a violent world robbed of justice and peace amounts to the mutilation of the heart and mind of Jesus, said de Chickera.

Dr Wedad Abbas Tawfik from the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria in Egypt shared how the Egyptian people have born “witness to the God of life” by facing up to turbulence in their country. She called the WCC theme a universal prayer, directly relevant to the Egyptian Christians who, following events of the 'Arab Spring', have worked with their fellow Muslim citizens in pursuit of dignity, peace and social justice for their country.

These presentations were followed by a conversation in which the young theologian Mélisande Schifter responded to the presentations by highlighting the significant role of young Christians in all the struggles of the churches, working together on issues of justice and peace.

The plenary session was moderated by Archbishop Dr Vicken Aykazian of the Armenian Church of America.

This session set the tone for the conversations and programmes of the WCC assembly for coming days. While presentations in the session stressed the importance of the WCC assembly theme being phrased as a prayer, it also brought into focus social and local realities of the churches.

WCC hears about attacks on Egyptian Christians

“‘God of life, lead us to justice and peace’ has become a prayer around the world.” These were words of Dr Wedad Abbas Tawfik about the theme of the World Council of Churches (WCC) 10th Assembly.

She shared her experiences and hopes for social and political stability as a Coptic Christian in her country, Egypt. Tawfik, who was one of the speakers at the World Council of Churches (WCC) 10th Assembly in Busan, Republic of



Dr Wedad Abbas Tawfik tells WCC delegates about the situation for Christians in Egypt.

Korea, made special reference to the situation of Christians in the Middle East,

Egypt and Syria in particular, inviting prayers for peace for the region.

Tawfik was addressing a plenary session of the WCC assembly on 31 October.

“Experience of turmoil and pain in my own country allow me to share with you how Christians in Egypt continue to bear witness to the God of life,” said Tawfik, who is also a member of the Middle East Council of Churches.

She explained that Christianity has deep roots in the history of Egypt. Therefore the recent developments and turmoil affecting Egyptians are most unfortunate.

Tawfik added that many Egyptians have seen their loved ones killed, injured, arrested or tortured, with Coptic Christians among them. Coptic churches have been attacked, and the property of Christians has been destroyed, and relatives have been killed.

The December 2010 “Arab Spring” raised the expectations of the Egyptians, aspiring for “justice and peace” in the Middle East region, has resulted in violence and instability.

For Tawfik, the turmoil for Christians in Egypt began when they woke up to the news of an atrocious bombing of the Alexandria Church in 2011. The bombing resulted in killings of more than twenty people, according to media reports.

“This terrorist attack still managed to unite both Christians and Muslims into a bond of suffering, where they mourned together.

The Muslims also stood up in several localities to protect the Christians while they prayed in their churches,” Tawfik shared.

“True Islam is against violence. By committing such acts, the terrorists violate the Islamic rules.”

Striving for justice and peace

The suffering experienced by the churches was only part of the whole picture of the country’s suffering, Tawfik said. Shortly after, on 25 January in 2011, both Christians and Muslims rushed together to the streets demanding their right to dignified life, freedom and social justice.

For several days, Tawfik explains, “violence showed its ugly face, leaving countless peaceful protestors being attacked, yet they met with victory, and an oppressive regime was ousted, leaving behind an elated and hopeful

Egypt”.

She said, “After two years Egyptians went to the streets again, only more unified, determined and hopeful this time, rising against the oppressive regime.”

Yet the challenges for Egyptians continued, said Tawfik. She shared that many Christians were killed in various government raids, while schools, buildings, orphanages, houses, buses and cars owned by the churches and Christians were destroyed.

She went on to say that these terrorist attacks were perpetrated in the name of Islam. They clearly violate the values and principles of Islam which promote justice

and peace for all, as is the case with all other religions.

Amidst this suffering, Tawfik said, the church did not forget its role, as “God knows our troubles and is our patience, and fulfills good will for all.”

“With this faith the churches has been striving for justice and peace. Witnessing the God of life in suffering is a real challenge, but the churches in Egypt have proved to be a true witness, and praying faithfully, ‘God of life, lead us to justice and peace,’” concluded Tawfik.

Examining the contours of religion, politics and power

Former World Council of Churches' General Secretary, the Rev Dr Konrad Raiser, has discussed his new book *Religion, Power, Politics* at the WCC Assembly, taking place in Busan, Republic of Korea.

Dr Raiser is a theologian from Germany and author of many works in the area of political ethics and public theology, including *For a Culture of Life: Transforming Globalisation and Violence*.

The relationship between religion and politics has become more problematic and conflicted, both locally and globally. Dr Raiser raises the crucial question of power and the possibility of a new role for religions.

In conversation with assembly participants, Dr Raiser addressed the major themes in his book, including: the role of religion and politics in conflict; the debate about religion in the public sphere; religion and politics in Islam.

Dr Stephen Brown, who translated the book from German to English, facilitated the conversation and book signing. Dr

Brown is a long-standing ecumenical commentator and journalist, facilitator of global ethical dialogue, and an Ekklesia associate.

Dr Raiser was asked what prompted him to write the book. He said that “in my experience in my final years as General Secretary of the WCC, I began to realise that we were confronted with the manifestation of power based on religious claims and that our international political analysis had successfully eliminated religion from the political order.”

“Our adaption of the separation of church and state and the idea that religion had little or nothing to do with the political world made me see the need to develop a new approach between religion and politics,” he continued.

This view is informed by the role that religion plays to articulate the identity of a community. Dr Raiser sees it as a basic marker of many communities. He added: “Religion and culture in most places of the world cannot be separated from public life. It is a critical part of culture.”

Speaking on the question of inter-religious dialogue, Dr Raiser said that inter-religious dialogue is one of the key issues and challenges for ecumenism in the 21st century. He added that it must become one of the central tasks of the ecumenical movement.

He also referred to the work begun by the WCC in this area with the publication of the landmark document *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World* in June 2011. The WCC co-produced this guide together with the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance following five years of joint work.

Speaking further on the dialogue between Christianity and Islam, Dr Raiser said that Christians ought to provide “accompaniment, support and encourage

debate in the Muslim world rather than stigmatise with the catchword of 'fundamentalism'".

His book *Religion, Power, Politics* was published in 2013 by WCC Publications, which is hosting a series of book events at the WCC assembly, including books by Christian artist He Qi and Canadian musician Andrew Donaldson.

Renowned ecumenical news agency closes its doors

It has now been confirmed that Ecumenical News International (ENInews) will not outlive the drastic financial reductions imposed by its two main sponsors, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

Approaches made to other potential partners, notably in Asia, proved fruitless. It is the end of an adventure that strengthened the influence of the ecumenical movement. ENInews was a true press agency, independent, recognised and given awards several times over.

Its network of almost 50 correspondents on five continents, linked to a very well informed editorial team based in Geneva, produced a stream of trustworthy and quality news.

It's true that certain news critical of the WCC itself was received with considerable ill-feeling within the establishment. But to say that this was the reason for its downfall is to go too far.

It was clearly the financial difficulties facing the WCC that led it to turn off the financial tap in favour of other activities that in its eyes were more vital. It was a choice that brought with it the withdrawal of the LWF,

leaving the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), WACC and others as sole supporters of ENInews. Ecumenical News International contributed to the influence of the ecumenical movement by deploying a clear and valued editorial line. Careful to find topics using the prism of the great inspirations of the ecumenical movement, it provided a unique thread of information.

It allowed readers to hear an echo of the WCC's intuitions at the heart of its member churches, in their social engagement, their ethical and spiritual debates. Reading ENInews presented many observers with clear information about what was at stake, the progresses and impediments affecting relations between the churches, but also between the global North and South. In a study commissioned in 2009, the importance of institutional type coverage was observed: more than 45 per cent of ENI stories sent out in 2006 was about statements by church leaders or executives! A high proportion, some would say too high.

Certainly this statistic reflected the intensity of exchanges and meetings at the heart of the ecumenical movement as much as the attention Christians of different backgrounds were giving to each other.

For more than 15 years, the undeniable "institutional ecumenical winter" has cut the ground from under the feet not only of the WCC in Geneva, but also of all those who depended, financially and culturally, on its activities. ENI was one. It paid the heaviest price, even if those responsible for it tried during the last few years to secure new sources of finance.

Activists call on WCC to acknowledge LGBT rights

The issue of equality for all people was raised at the World Council of Churches

10th Assembly by a group of LGBT activists.

They are asking the gathering to be more inclusive. The group is pushing the global assembly to recognise that LGBT equality will become a key issue for churches going forward, and the WCC and its churches should be discussing the issue, not brushing the issue aside.

The group of LGBT activists, the Create Safe Space Caucus, includes the Rev Mike Scheunemeyer, UCC executive for LGBT concerns. He believes that although the values of faith and human dignity were echoed throughout worship and business session, organisers from the WCC did not do enough to acknowledge sexual orientation or gender identity issues.

The caucus, in an effort to make sure the WCC hears their message, distributed a statement that addressed the absence of LGBT issues on Thursday, Oct. 31, a day after the WCC 10th assembly began in Busan, South Korea.

"When we learn to speak about these things, we learn to build more communities that are whole, and just," Scheunemeyer told a group of representatives of North American churches at a meeting that night. Schuenemeyer is one of two dozen people from the UCC attending the WCC gathering.

The CSCC, an international group of LGBT activists committed to making spaces at the WCC General Assembly that bring to light issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, is hosting a pair of conversations on 1 November and 6 November on ways for faith communities can create safe spaces for conversations around LGBT issues.

"How is it that in the Secretary General's report, the Moderator's report and in every other word, spoken or sung, that such silence should exist on such a critical issue facing the churches throughout the world?"

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the caucus asked in its statement. "A simple acknowledgment that this is an issue facing the church would have been a step in the right direction.

"Silence on sexual orientation and gender identity perpetuates the stigma and discrimination faced by marginalised people and increases vulnerabilities," the statement continues.

The full statement by the CSCC reads as follows: "The Create Safe Space Caucus offers a mixed response to the opening day of the World Council of Churches General Assembly in Busan.

"The opening worship, plenary and business session were well grounded in the gospel values of love, justice and peace. His Holiness Karenkin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of all Armenians reminded participants, "Each of us is different... Our mutual faith in Christ — truly our love for the Lord — is what unites us." He proclaimed that Christ encourages us "to regard our fellow human beings, without exception, in the full dignity and holiness of their personhood."

"These values emanated from the liturgies, presentations and reports on this first day. However, for the Create Safe Space Caucus the absence of any mention of sexual orientation or gender identity created the sense of invisibility. How is it that in the Secretary General's report, the Moderator's report and in every other word, spoken or sung, that such silence should exist on such a critical issue facing the churches throughout the world? A simple acknowledgment that this is an issue facing the church would have been a step in the right direction.

"Silence on sexual orientation and gender identity perpetuates the stigma and discrimination faced by marginalized people and increases vulnerabilities. This is particularly poignant today, as many will observe Thursdays in Black, a movement towards a world without rape and violence.

Sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity are part of what it means to be human. Thus, these are concerns which are part of life in every community throughout the world, including other marginalised communities [that] may also feel invisible.

"Any serious effort toward justice and peace must address stigma and discrimination in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity. At the very least, the concern must be named along with a commitment to creating safe spaces for constructive dialogue."

A day of global pilgrimage with the Korean churches

Christians gathered from around the world at the World Council of Churches 10th Assembly have been sharing in a 'pilgrimage of peace' with their host Korean churches.

Some have embarked on travel to different parts of the country, including the border, while others remain in Busan, the location for the meeting of some 3,000 people - representatives of churches from six continents, guests, observers and media.

Much of the 30 October - 8 November 2013 Assembly takes place in plenary and in working groups. The weekend gave delegates and participants an opportunity to engage with the local context and to pray and reflect on the significance of it all. For example, Padre James Bhagwan celebrated an early morning Holy Communion on the Haeundae Beach, Busan, with the young people of Pasifika Oikoumene. He is the Secretary for Communication in the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma.

Meanwhile, Niklas Eklov, Peace and Human Rights policy advisor in the Church of Sweden International Department,

urged prayer for those feeling the pain of division from the border that presently separates the two Korean states.

"Thank you, Myungsung church, for an unforgettable cultural night full of music and dance!" tweeted Miriam Weibye from the Church of Scotland.

"Near the border, we realize what the division of the Korean peninsula means," declared four US and Canadian participants.

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, who had earlier brought a message to the WCC Assembly from the worldwide Anglican Communion, observed: "Good time at World Council of Churches. [The] breadth of [the] church [is] staggering. The Korean church [is] serving poorest all over Asia despite being poor."

As Sunday morning dawned, World Council of Churches Assembly participants shared in early morning worship with different congregations in Busan and other parts of the country.