

**European Regional Pre-Assembly: A virtual gathering on the theme
'Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity'
25-26 February 2022**

Tragically overshadowed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the European Regional Pre-assembly offered a space for churches in Europe to come together to discuss common issues, reflect on what it means to be church in Europe today, and what that means for a WCC Assembly hosted in Europe. As the gathering discussed a variety of issues in different geographical and ecclesial contexts, themes of reconciliation, secularity, and unity threaded together into a rich tapestry of common understanding and vision.

At the start of the Pre-Assembly, the attack against Ukraine was under way and 100,000 citizens had already moved to the Polish border and the borders of the neighbouring countries.¹ The theme of the WCC Assembly 'Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity', acquired a new urgency, which set the tone for the virtual gathering: the unity of the Church and the unity of the world belong together. This is an apocalyptic moment in the sense that churches and ecumenical organisations are being called to concrete action and challenged to take a stance.

As participants listened to the responses of churches to the war in Ukraine, questions of unity, interconnectedness, and reconciliation came to the fore. Europe's churches and societies are intertwined and inter-dependent, underlining the importance of solidarity towards the suffering member of the one body (1 Cor. 12:26). It became evident that the war will impact the way churches in Europe prepare for the WCC Assembly, and consequently the Assembly itself. Churches in Ukraine are demonstrating unity at a time of great division. But the conflict raises questions about intra-Orthodox unity, and the unity of the WCC fellowship with its member churches in Russia.

While reflecting on the theme of the 11th WCC Assembly, secularity and increased plurality were discussed as the societal contexts in which churches in Europe fulfil their mission of reconciliation and unity. In some areas, there is pushback against a culturally Christian society, accompanied by growing religious illiteracy. There is a general trend of people moving away from institutional religion, although there

¹ According to the UNHCR, The UN Refugee Service, 6,659,220 persons fled Ukraine by 25 May 2022. See refugee influx in neighbouring countries on <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

is a corresponding surge in those seeking spirituality. This increasing secularisation has resulted in a diminution of the role of the Church within society. This loss is perceived as a tragedy by many within churches, along with a determination to try to resist or even reverse this decline. Others stress that secularisation is not the biggest issue for our churches – there are other problems both in Europe and around the world on which churches should focus their time and energy.

It is often difficult to discern or communicate a Christian voice in a largely secular public space, and churches themselves can struggle to translate God's message into the language of secular society. The space of religion in society can itself be controversial at times, as politicians use religion to further their own particular agendas. But Christ did not call us to be the establishment – God calls us to be more faithful to what Christ challenged us to be. Churches have a valuable message to share on issues such as freedom of religion, civil rights, and migration, a message that is (or should be) rooted in the diaconal calling of the churches. Churches are the salt of the earth and the yeast of the bread – often unseen, but integral elements of a greater whole. It is our role to show that we are the salt and yeast, as we navigate a secular society with humility, honesty, self-commitment to witness and confidence in the public domain.

The theme of the 11th WCC Assembly is Christocentric and missional, but not exclusivist. Christ's love, radical compassion and solidarity with those who suffer, is at the centre of the reflections and preparations of churches for the Assembly. The proposed 'ecumenism of the heart' plays a particularly important role in churches' efforts towards the visible unity of the Church and the strengthening of the work of reconciliation. Case studies discussed during the Pre-Assembly demonstrated that a) churches can play a significant role as mediators in our communities and in promoting reconciliation through their fundamental unity in Christ, whilst recognising that people exist in a variety of different cultural and social settings, and b) reconciliation needs to be based on an understanding of justice. In both cases, there cannot be reconciliation without a true understanding of justice, and there cannot be peace without a just peace.

In the mediating role, the churches are demonstrating their value by being safe places where differing parties can come together to seek reconciliation. We can come to the table with the intent for peace – it should be a priority to raise the prophetic voice of the churches, and to call for peace and justice. But speaking of Christ's love cannot bypass the truth – we must be aware of the world into which

we preach. How do we provide spiritual leadership in an apocalyptic moment? "Those who love peace must organise as effectively as those who love war." *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

The Pre-Assembly looked at examples of harassment, tribalism, intra-church conflict, colonialism, and the treatment of indigenous peoples within and by churches. The churches have not always been a safe space for everyone, and nor are they now. Participants in the Pre-Assembly also stressed the need to be aware of Euro-centric attitudes and listen to those who have been hurt. At times, so-called Christian values can mislead the churches and Christian people; for instance, if they keep silent in the face of atrocities. Churches need to be self-critical of their failings as, without this self-examination, no ecumenism can be of purpose. Therefore, the task facing churches is to take ownership of their sins of the past (and present), and actively look to be transformed.

While reflecting on increased plurality in society and the Church, Pre-Assembly participants focused on ways of coming together to discuss controversial issues and agree on common actions. The usual church parliamentary style of producing papers and statements for discussion and adoption is not wholly suitable when dealing with controversial issues; it often results in making opposing positions visible and more cemented. It is important that people with differing views are encouraged to come together in the same room over an extended length of time in order to build trust and seek peace. The kind of atmosphere that develops in the room is often most significant. Love and respect will pave the way for change and understanding. Without an atmosphere of peace and kindness, the acts of listening and finding common ground are impossible. So, churches need to think counterintuitively and find "non-strategic" ways of approaching each other in the spirit of receptive ecumenism. For it is only ecumenically that churches can meet the challenges facing them.

Churches in Europe are part of the worldwide movement of transformation, aware of their responsibilities and strongly committed to the work of global unity and reconciliation. They are neither resigned nor inactive. The witness of young people is particularly strong in calling churches to action, and this has been evidenced over recent years, particularly in the struggle for climate justice. The Church's call to discipleship implies that a) churches are learning communities: they need to be open to change and transformation, b) churches are healing communities: they need to be able to address wounds of the past and present,

and c) churches are agents of hope: in the midst of hopelessness, they experience and share the joy of Christian faith.

Although the war against Ukraine is a new shock to Europe that churches and Christians are grappling with, the city of Karlsruhe continues its preparations to host the WCC Assembly. The city, set on the banks of the Rhine near the French-German border, is a witness to a long history of reconciliation after World War II, and is an example of cross-border dialogue and reconciliation in Europe. Churches in Europe hope that the upcoming Assembly will be a truly intergenerational, interconnected, and prophetic Assembly, prepared by local communities as they reflect on the biblical stories of Jesus' compassion. They hope that this Assembly will be an ecumenical boost for Europe that will strengthen the role of ecumenism and religion's role in our societies.

Note:

The European Pre-Assembly was attended by 199 delegates and other participants. The meeting was originally to have taken place in Warsaw, Poland, but convened online due to Covid-19 restrictions.

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