

'I will give you future and hope' (Jeremiah 29:11)

Seventieth Anniversary of Church and Peace

17 – 19 May 2019 in Berlin, Germany

Greetings of the General Secretary of the WCC: Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit

1. Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity!

Dear colleagues and friends, sisters and brothers in Christ,

I greet you with the theme for the forthcoming 11th assembly of the WCC 2021 in Karlsruhe (Germany): Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity! God gives future and hope, embracing the world with the steadfast love of the Triune God and reconciling and uniting the world in Christ.

When I think of the Church and Peace network and its contribution to the ecumenical movement during the last seventy years since 1949, I think of obedient discipleship in Christ and a prophetic witness for peace and non-violent action as decisive marks of your contribution. You call the Christians to be ambassadors of Christ in the ministry of reconciliation (2. Cor 5: 14.20). You constantly remind the ecumenical movement of the preferential option for non-violence as a response to Christ's love and God's gift of justice and peace as signs of God's reign to come.

That is who you are. This belongs to your DNA. Celebrating the seventieth anniversary this year, you trace the history of Church and Peace back to the Historic Peace Churches European Continuation Committee that brought together Mennonites, the Society of Friends (Quakers), and the Church of the Brethren in 1949. Working together with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the World Council of Churches in dialogue and close cooperation, the platform emerged that became Church and Peace in 1978.

Your presence in the ecumenical movement and your cooperation with the WCC advanced theological reflection on peace, always reminding yourself and others that witness for peace cannot remain just theoretical but has to show its relevance in practical steps of peace education and of peacebuilding in conflict situations.

2. Love, reconciliation, and unity: A personal experience

Interpreting the theme of the 11th assembly at the occasions that offer themselves, is now one of my tasks as WCC general secretary. However, there is more to it. I do believe that the focus on Christ's love that moves the world to reconciliation and peace is deeply meaningful for your work and witness. I would like to illustrate this through a story that came back to my mind when I was asked to lecture on the assembly theme. This story also sheds light on the issues at stake after the Second World War, 50 to 70 years ago, but remain so relevant today in a world of exclusion, ethnic pride and racism.

As a 10-year-old boy, I lived in a parsonage in the rural districts in Norway, near Trondheim, one of the largest cities of the country. I started to discover the public library, and particularly the books that were written about the Second World War as it happened in those areas and villages where I was living. It was a strategic area of the country for the occupying German forces; there was very heavy pressure from the Nazi regime on the resistance movement there. So, in one of the books I read about one of the raids in my village, seeking out the members of the organized resistance movement. The parsonage, our home, was confiscated and used as centre for interrogation of the suspects. I read more: One young man was tortured – and killed. Some of the details in the book made me draw the conclusion that it might have happened in the room next to my bedroom.

The cruel evil of war and abuse of power in the name of a certain ideology, a so-called national socialism with great ambitions on behalf of the nation and the pretended ethnicity of the white, arian race, had manifested itself in the house where I lived. Patriotism, love for the nation, for its freedom, democracy and justice, had a martyr – right next to my room. I was shocked and shaken. This was the brutal reality of war. I was no less shaken when my parents and I visited people I read about in these books, who had been tortured and imprisoned, and who showed pictures of what happened to some of them and the people they had helped to flee out of the country to Sweden.

A short time after my reading about these things, a ceremony was organized marking some of the brave men's efforts. I had asked my father if I could come along with him, as he was asked to preach at the occasion. He accepted. I was fascinated and thrilled by listening to the speeches and stories of these war veterans, and how one of them escaped the German soldiers. But something upset my father, and later he explained why. In some of the speeches there were messages saying that we should not forget. That was why we were there. But one of the speakers had said: "We cannot be in union with the people that occupied us and humiliated us. We had to ask in their language even to go to the toilet." This was in 1972, when Norway was preparing for a referendum about membership in the European Union. For me it was quite understandable that some of them had that attitude, after what they had experienced. Then my father gave me another challenge, asking: "What will happen if we never can leave something behind us, and reconcile with one another – after we have said and known the truth about what happened? How will life be if we never can move forward into another time? And how can we hold everybody, every German woman and man, guilty for these brutal actions some experienced in Norway during the war?"

These questions have shaped a lot of my understanding of justice and injustice, truth and reconciliation, and what love means in real life. I have become more and more aware that our theology, and particularly our reflections on reconciliation and unity, are not abstract issues and objectives, but are relevant in the context of injustice, racism and poisoned memories. Many others, with far more dramatic experiences than mine, have also come to the same questions and convictions. The role of the churches in sharing the gospel of Christ's love has an impact on the human beings, as persons and individuals. However, it is not limited to a private sphere, or to some pious people. Love is a huge issue, and not so easy to understand – and definitely nothing superficial. The call to preach the gospel of Christ's love is a call to serve the reconciliation of the world. Nothing less.

Yes, the WCC's emphasis of just peace cannot remain just a theological concept. It must become embodied in our witness for peacebuilding and non-violent action. It is your gift and your role in the ecumenical movement as Church and Peace network to inspire and foster exactly this. I want to thank you and those who came before you for all the important contributions made.

Peace and blessings to you for the future!