

Some impressions and results of the 11th WCC Assembly, Karlsruhe, 31.8. to 8.9. 2022

Antje Heider-Rottwilm

Moderator of Church and Peace - European Peace Church Network

Church and Peace was very present at the Assembly in Karlsruhe. General Secretary Lydia Funck was deeply involved in the preparation and implementation of the Ecumenical Encounter Place Peace and Justice, and Board member Kees Nieuwerth, delegate of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands, was involved in many events in and outside the programme of the Assembly.

Many members and friends of Church and Peace were involved in Karlsruhe.¹

In addition, Church and Peace had been granted observer status for the assembly.

So, on 29 and 30 August I first took part in the preliminary meeting of the assembly. At the beginning, everyone came together: The youth, the people with limitations/different abled, the indigenous peoples, the participants of the conference 'Just community of women and men'.

After the manifold service, the groups split up into their own events. For the women, the focus was on the theme of violence, both within and outside the church, deepened by themes like: Gender and Covid, Race and Gender, Gender and Media. The outgoing chairperson of the Central Committee, Dr Agnes Aboum, underlined the destructive consequences of climate change for women's livelihoods.

The 'Thursdays in Black' campaign plays an important role on all continents: a sign of solidarity and resistance to violence [#ThursdaysinBlack: Stories flow from the Waterfall Tapestry | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)

The frustration of Black women was overwhelming. For decades, all the issues have been known - also the ways to fight violence and exclusion, but nothing fundamental changes. On the contrary, development is going backwards.

How much longer should we put time, energy, money into changing church and society?

Where are the churches - resolute, radical? Where are the perpetrators being called by their names? Enough is enough! No cheap unity! were their cries.

At the end, all the assemblies shared their results. Everywhere, abuse of power, violence, exclusion were central experiences. The lamentation of the youth was shocking: all the issues that many of us have been engaged in for decades - now they threaten the future of young people in unbroken severity. Kyrie eleison!

The workshop that Dr Ana Raffai and I offered as part of the 'Brunnen' programme was fitting to the issues: Patriarchy and violence against women as a challenge for theology, liturgy, structure and life of churches and faith communities. A well-attended workshop with committed participants.

Apart from the Brunnen workshops, participants were invited to meet and exchange daily in 'homegroups' - and to take part in 'Ecumenical Conversations'. I had registered for the topic

¹ [Church and Peace involvement in WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe 2022 focuses on peace, justice and role of the churches | Church and Peace \(church-and-peace.org\)](#)

'Ecumenical Call to Just Peace: Holistic approaches to peacebuilding', which was attended by people from South Sudan, Nigeria, Colombia, Korea, among others. The group's decisions went to the committee for consideration of the recommendations "What works for peace: moving the world towards reconciliation and unity."

Looking at the plenary sessions, I was particularly impressed, even embarrassed, by the speech of the German President, who felt he had to present to the Assembly what he expected of it - in the dual role of Christian and head of state of the host country. The Ukrainian delegation was warmly welcomed, the Russian Patriarch was accused of blasphemy, the Russian delegation should not be given a stage for justification and propaganda, Israel should under no circumstances be named as an apartheid state. I would have liked Steinmeier's message to have been: I want to listen to what people from all parts of the world bring to Karlsruhe, what we can learn from them...It was said that the Foreign Office tried to prevent Steinmeier from coming to Karlsruhe - and asked daily what the state of the debate was on the two most explosive issues.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/german-president-extends-wishes-for-fruitful-wcc-11th-assembly-characterised-by-hope>

The initiative to condemn Israel as an apartheid state on the basis of various international studies was one of the pain points of the meeting. Interim General Secretary Ioan Saucă reported very impressively that the churches in the Middle East had asked him to prevent that existentially necessary doors were slammed shut by resolutions meant in solidarity. The other pain point was Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church and relatedly the Russian Orthodox delegation in relation to the Ukrainian one. Of course there were no official meetings, of course there were conversations in the background with one and the other. What happened beyond that can only be assumed. The final statement 'War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region' is based on the Central Committee statement from June 2022, which the Russian members had not blocked despite the possibilities of the consensus procedure.(as follow-up: [Exclusive interview with WCC acting general secretary after the visit to Moscow | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#))

Some particularly memorable situations during the AGM:

Brother Alois from Taizé was invited to greet - and led it on into a time of silence, kneeling beside the desk, which he concluded with 'Laudate omnes gentes', sung by about 4000 people.

This was the first time the Archbishop of Canterbury had been present at an Assembly since the WCC was founded in Amsterdam, with a stirring address. An important ecumenical sign in these times! [Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby's address at the WCC 11th Assembly | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](#)

The general secretary of Religions for Peace, Prof. Azza Karam, gave an impressive speech, free and challenging: If Jesus died for all, then also for us Muslims, then really for all, so that we may live love together in and for this world.

Votum of a Coptic Bishop: We are diverse, but we have changed it into differences.

The young participants repeatedly brought themselves to the attention of the AGM, claimed participation, future perspectives, especially climate justice.

The delegates from the Pacific and the indigenous peoples from the northern regions of Europe made the dramatic nature of the climate crisis particularly clear, as their livelihoods are irrevocably disappearing.

And central, of course, were the prayers and services in the middle of the meeting area under the tent roof: diverse texts, rhythms, sounds, sermons in a diverse community - very moved and often moving!!!

Meeting and re-meeting so many people after years of Corona abstinence was great!

The media interest was sobering - apparently there were no attractive personalities and topics worth reporting on.

The representatives of the historic peace churches met several times to discuss the events and further strategies. Davorka Lovrekovic, a Quaker representative, managed to introduce the topic of the right to conscientious objection into the documents. I myself managed to convince a delegate to insert in the paragraph of the final declaration on 'War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region': " In response to increased militarisation, confrontation and weapons proliferation, we *call* for a much greater investment by the governments of Europe and the entire international community in searching for and promoting peace, *and in strengthening non-violent conflict resolution, civil conflict transformation and reconciliation processes*, rather than in escalating confrontation and division. " Hopefully we can build on this.

Basically, there was too little time for plenary discussions. It was a pity about the very good reports of the outgoing Central Committee Chair, Dr Agnes Aboum, and the outgoing Interim General Secretary, Dr Ioan Sauca. In order to discuss the draft resolutions - prepared by the Central Committee and further processed in the committees - in plenary, there were only two readings, each with consensus procedures and only a few minutes for each intervention from the floor. The meeting, which was very shortened for cost reasons, was very dense.

At the end of the meeting, Dr Aboum and Dr Sauca were bid farewell with great thanks. The new General Secretary is the South African Presbyterian Dr Jerry Pillay, the Chair of the Central Committee is the German Lutheran Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm.

The following documents are particularly important to me for the further discussion and implementation of the decisions of the General Assembly in connection with the topic of 'Just Peace':²

- "War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region", statement by the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany
<https://www.oikoumene.org/fr/resources/documents/war-in-ukraine-peace-and-justice-in-the-european-region>

² In addition, there are of course other remarkable decisions and protocol points, for example on the genocide of Syrian Christians, on Nagorno-Karabakh, on the Korean peninsula, on West Papua.

The first paragraph is about the war, the second about Europe's unacceptable handling of migration and flight.

- "Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East", a statement of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC)
<https://www.oikoumene.org/de/resources/documents/seeking-justice-and-peace-for-all-in-the-middle-east>
 The declaration describes the disastrous situation in the region, names the studies that lead to the term apartheid, describes that there are different positions on this in the Assembly and calls for concrete steps.
- Statement on Confronting Racism and Xenophobia, Overcoming Discrimination, Ensuring Belonging
<https://www.oikoumene.org/de/resources/documents/statement-on-confronting-racism-and-xenophobia-overcoming-discrimination-ensuring-belonging>
 The text shows lines from colonialism to racism, discrimination against people from the Middle East as potential terrorists, different ways of dealing with refugees in Europe, anti-Semitism, discrimination against indigenous peoples and populist movements in many regions of the world and calls for 'passionate advocacy', among other things.
- "The Things That Make For Peace: Moving the World to Reconciliation and Unity", Statement of the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany.
<https://www.oikoumene.org/de/resources/documents/the-things-that-make-for-peace-moving-the-world-to-reconciliation-and-unity>
 The statement follows previous declarations on peace, reaffirms the demands of the peace organisations' letter to the Assembly regarding immediate accession to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, consequent disarmament, and affirms that the ecumenical movement rejects and denounces war because it is contrary to God's will.
- "*The Living Planet: Seeking a Just and Sustainable Global Community*", Statement by the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany
<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-living-planet-seeking-a-just-and-sustainable-global-community> The statement says: "We are running out of time. This Assembly is the last chance we have to act together to prevent the planet from becoming uninhabitable." One of the decisions:" establishing a Commission on Climate Change and Sustainable Development."
- "A Call to Act Together": Message of the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany
<https://www.oikoumene.org/fr/resources/documents/message-of-the-wcc-11th-assembly-a-call-to-act-together>

The appeal should be read in all congregations. It summarises the pain points and challenges and is an encouragement for a 'pilgrimage of justice, reconciliation and unity'.