

## **The eleventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches Karlsruhe 31<sup>st</sup> August to 9<sup>th</sup> September.**

### **And yet again we wrestle with questions of war and peace.**

A nearly impossible task: to write a report on an assembly of the World council of Churches which is convened only one in seven/eight years and lasts eight long and intensive days! Worship services, meetings for business, base- and working groups, full days from morning till evening. Therefore this cannot possibly be considered a *complete* report of this Assembly. Which is why I shall focus particularly on how questions of war and peace have been considered at this gathering.

### **The Assembly.**

A meeting of – all in all- more than 4000 participants, delegates of the (more than 350) member churches, more than 250 representatives of ecumenical partner organizations (e.g. national and regional councils of churches in Europe, North- and South America, the Pacific, Asia, but also ACT- Alliance), some 180 journalists and guests and – not to forget – the 150 stewards, youngsters who took care of indispensable support at this gathering.

In the course of the meeting greetings were received from the worldwide Evangelical and Pentecostal movement, the Pope, Patriarch Bartholomeus, the Jewish community in Germany and Religions for Peace.

### **Peace Churches.**

Each time at one of these large meetings of the World Council I stimulated the representatives of the traditional Peace Churches (Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren) to hold meetings the day before as well as during the meeting to coordinate amongst ourselves. The number of delegates eligible to take part in decision-making is very limited. The Quakers amongst them can be counted on one hand: there are only three Yearly meetings worldwide which are full-fledged members of the WCC – Canada Yearly Meeting, Friends United and Friends General Conference in the USA. FWCC is entitled to send a delegated observer as it is an ecumenical partner organization. But next to the official delegates there are representatives of partner organizations, observers and guests of Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren from all corners of the world.

Often the Moravians and Waldensians also attend these meetings. Moreover the delegated observer of the European ecumenical peace movement Church and Peace is also invited.

This time we were more than forty of us!

Next to discussing what we might contribute during this assembly we also concluded that we need to stay in contact – as a network – between assemblies.

Moreover we advise that when one of our three traditional peace churches is holding a world conference, representatives of the other two should be invited to attend.

Thanks to these meetings we have been able to contribute to some of the statements to be decided upon by this eleventh assembly.

I will get back to this later.

### **Heavy subjects.**

For quite some time this proved to become a rather difficult meeting the WCC on account of three heavy and timely subjects.: first of all the *war in Ukraine*, secondly the increasing pressure to characterize the politics in Israel itself and especially the occupied territories as *apartheid* and thirdly the call for stronger engagement in the face of *climate change and ecojustice*.

### **Proceedings.**

During the opening we were welcomed not only by the (acting) Secretary General and the moderator of the Central Committee, but also by the mayor of Karlsruhe and even the President of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The mayor was offered a Lebanon Cedar tree as a present for the city.

He then announced that this tree would be planted in the ‘Garden of Religions’ which had been created at the 300 years commemoration of the founding of the city, a beautiful garden which – as I later discovered – was close to my hotel.

The town council had really put a lot of work into welcoming the assembly in this beautiful city. Even all public transport in the town during the assembly was free for all participants! President Steinmeier considered that holding this assembly in Germany close to the borders with France and Switzerland – the churches in the three countries being the hosts – very symbolic: a country and a region that knows about war, but also of reconciliation. And in reaction to the latter he reminded us gratefully of the fact that the German churches so soon after the second world war had been invited as equal partners at the founding assembly of the WCC at Amsterdam (and in this respect he mentioned explicitly the role of the Quakers involved...).

However, he continued his speech with a sharp and explicit condemnation of Russia for the war *in* and a strong statement of support *for* Ukraine. This evoked a strong public reaction from Russia already the next day. It only heightened the already existing tension. After all, ahead of the assembly there was a lot of discussion within the WCC whether the Russian-Orthodox church should be expelled from membership since its leadership openly supports the Russian armed invasion of Ukraine. Moreover one needs to realize that there are no member churches (yet) in Ukraine today. This led the WCC to organize a working visit to churches in Ukraine prior to the assembly and invite a delegation of several churches there to attend the assembly as special guests.

It was hoped that this assembly might provide a platform for representatives of the Russian-Orthodox church and Ukrainians churches to dialogue.

Preceding the assembly Church and Peace, together with a number of other church-based peace movements, wrote an *open letter to the WCC titled ‘Focus on Overcoming All Wars’*. In this letter the eleventh assembly was called upon to ‘provide a clear signal for the path just peace’. The assembly was also asked to ‘encourage all those that have doubts (on account of the war in Ukraine or wars elsewhere – to deprive the institution of war of any legitimacy’. Moreover some participants took part in a walk of peace/pilgrimage from Paderborn to Karlsruhe. At the assembly they offered a *petition entitled ‘War is contrary to the will of God*

– *a call to Christians worldwide*. A reference to the founding Assembly at Amsterdam (1948). In it reference was also made to the assembly of Vancouver (1983) where the *conciliar process Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation* was instituted. And the one of Harare (1998) where the *'Decade to overcome Violence'* was started which culminated in the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation at Kingston/Jamaica (2011) with the *statement on Just Peace*. All these decisions were adopted by consensus and wide support by the member churches, the Russian- Orthodox church included, were they not??? That is why several times at this assembly it was pointed out explicitly and repeatedly that 'no-one has the right to bless acts of war and genocide, referring to statements by Patriarch Kyrill. I myself prior to the assembly wrote a reaction to these statements on the website of the council of churches in the Netherhaldns.

In it I recalled that the international ecumenical movement at the assembly at Vancouver had explicitly adopted the opinion that we as member churches may hold one another 'mutually accountable' for statements issued on behalf of the church. In the light of the earlier statements of the WCC against war and for just peace referred to before this is certainly called for where the statements of Kyrill are concerned.

However, whether this should cause the Russian-Orthodox church to expelled from membership of the WCC? No, it should not: we need to call one antoher to accountability, to continue to be in dialogue and encourage one another to follow the way of Just Peace!

### **Decision-making.**

I am not sure whether you are aware that the WCC already years ago adopted the Quaker way of decision-making, although they would call it 'consensus decision-making'. So when decisions must be taken on e.g. appointments or statements the delegates are issued with one orange and one blue card.

If they agree with the proposal they will hold up their orange card, but if they cannot the blue one. The moderator will than ask those holding up a blue card whether they would 'stand aside' and accept the decision or not. In the latter case they are invited to have their objections/ comments recorded in the report of the assembly. However, when there are quite a few blue cards the proposal has not been accepted and further dialogue will have to take place.

This time also quite a few statements and minutes have been adopted on complex issues on which opinions differed widely during the dialogue.

Nevertheless, during the plenaries statements have been adopted in the above indicated manner on 'War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region', about the 'Consequences of the Nagorno-Karabach War', 'The Things That Make for Peace: Moving the World to Reconciliation and Unity', 'Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East' and 'The Living Planet: Seeking a Just and Sustainable Global Community'. These were all – after some discussion – decided upon in the above indicated manner, quite impressive! It is by quoting from some of these statements that I will illustrate here how we wrestled with questions of war and peace at this assembly.

## **Dialogue on war and peace.**

One of the text proposals which was emanated from our peace churches' meetings and was proposed by church and Peace for the statement on the war in Ukraine was incorporated : 'In response to increased militarization, 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.' Just above this there is another important part: 'We **recognize** that in war there are no "winners", and that no one should ever resort to war.'

And a little further on: 'Whilst war is directly destructive, the social and economic consequences of militarization cannot be overlooked.'

Moreover we read in the powerful statement of this assembly on the climate crisis and sustainability the call to 'end all wars and military drills, and divestment from fossil fuels, arms and other life-destroying sectors, coupled with a radical mobilization and redirection of resources towards the health and resilience of our communities and the protection and renewal of ecosystems that form the base of all our economies and societies.'

Somewhere else the WCC reiterated that 'our Christian brothers and sisters and the leadership of the churches in Russia as well as in Ukraine to raise their voices to oppose the continuing deaths, destruction, displacement and dispossession of the people of Ukraine. We call on the WCC to provide a platform for all voices for peace to be heard and amplified...' Somewhere else we read: 'Given the inevitable human cost, war must be avoided and churches have a key role in advocating for this. ... multilateral diplomacy – especially through the United Nations at the global level – retains a vitally important role in preserving peace.'

Finally, towards the end of the statement: 'One of the tragic consequences of the war in Ukraine is the greatly intensified militarization, confrontation and division on the continent of Europe with an enormous and largely uncontrolled proliferation of weapons in the region, and a renewed and escalating threat of nuclear conflict which would cause a catastrophe of an appalling and likely global magnitude. A new dividing line is being drawn across the continent, bristling with arms on either side. The history of the Cold War gives us a clear picture of what may follow, and the risks it will entail.'

During the customary session of all European participants at the assembly the moderator, the secretary-general of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), raised the question what we would like to pass on to the European Union from this assembly. When I asked for the microphone I then suggested that we should remind the EU of the fundamental values it was based upon: *Europe as a peace project* and *Never Again War*. That this would mean to abstain from

developing 'a military dimension' of the EU and on the contrary invest more in 'soft power, diplomacy and peace. That – whatever happens- after the war in Ukraine we would need to restore relations in Europe, also with Russia. That we need to work on 'inclusive security', a new security architecture in Europe'.

Then a member of the Ukrainian delegation said that he felt that I apparently had not yet understood that Russia is imperialistic and that a dialogue on inclusive security with such a state would be impossible....

As far as the nuclear threat is concerned : North Korea has in recent weeks several times launched a ballistic missile in the direction of South Korea and Japan. In the statement of the assembly on ‘Peace on the Korean Peninsula it says that although after ‘the Busan assembly, a period of escalating tensions was followed by a moment of high hope for peace in the region.. renewed tensions and increased risk of potentially catastrophic conflict once again prevail... We pray.. that the political reasons for the division (of the peninsula) Will be resolved and that the peaceful reunification will be achieved.’

The assembly also issued a statement on the time and again recurring war between Armenia and Azerbaijan: ‘the WCC condemns the use chemical weapons and cluster munitions, the targeting of civilians, hospitals and public infrastructure, and all other war crimes, beheadings, torture and other atrocities during the conflict.’ (This particular statement certainly would also have been appropriate in the statement on the war in Ukraine – KN).

### **Israel-Palestine.**

The conflict in the Middle-East, particularly – but not only – between Israel and Palestine was obviously also dealt with at the assembly. Not only was there an intensive workshop for four days in a row on peace in the Middle-East ( Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel-Palestine with good contributions by leading representatives from the region, known Palestinian, Syrian and Iraqi representatives), but also another statement that was unanimously accepted.

In this document it is stated that ‘the violent extremism using religion as justification, ongoing military occupations, discrimination and systematic violations of human rights, economic crises and corruption, absence of the rule of law, and other factors have contributed to an existential crisis for all the region.’ The statement then continues that ‘only equal rights, inclusive citizenship, justice and dignity for all, without religious or racial discrimination’ can restore this. But ‘sadly the reality on the ground in different countries of the Middle-East challenges this vision.’

The ‘right to self-determination of the Palestinians’ is recognize once more and ‘the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories since 1967, as well as settlement construction and expansion in occupied territories is once again considered illegal under international law and must be ended.’ A ‘ just, comprehensive and lasting peace settlement’ is needed – according to the assembly – that secures ‘the security of both Palestinians and Israelis.’

‘Discrimination against Palestinians is overt and systemic.’

From several sides the assembly was urged to voice out that the policies of Israel – towards the Arabic minority within Israel as well as the Palestinian people – equals ‘apartheid’. This met resistance from some delegates who judged such a qualification ‘not helpful’ in finding a political solution. Ultimately the statement ‘Seeking Justice for All in the Middle-East the very *fact* was included that ‘ recently numerous international, Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations and legal bodies have published studies and reports describing the policies and actions of Israel as amounting to “apartheid” under international law.’ The statement then continues by stating that ‘within this assembly some churches and delegates

strongly support the utilization of this term as accurately describing the reality of the people in Palestine/Israel and the position under international law, while others find it inappropriate, unhelpful and painful. We are not of one mind on this matter. We must continue to struggle with this issue, while we continue working together on this journey of justice and peace. We pray that the WCC continues to provide a safe space for its member churches for conversation and collaboration in pursuing truth, and working for a just peace among all people in the region.’ Towards the end of the statement however the WCC is called upon ‘to examine, discuss and discern the implications of the recent reports by B’Tselem, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and for its governing bodies to respond appropriately.’

### **Workshops.**

During the assembly I also contributed to some four of the many different workshops. For example to one with Renke Brahm and Dirk Harmsen on nuclear disarmament, with Ralf Becker and Marie-Noëlle Koyara on rethinking/ inclusive security in Europe and Africa, on right sharing of scarce resources and a panel discussion on the lobbying by the church on the climate emergency and sustainability organized by the Conference of European Churches and the WCC.

### **Worries.**

On the second day of the assembly I wrote a “blog” for the Council of Churches in the Netherlands. In it I expressed my worries and concern about a proposal of the (acting) Secretary-General of the WCC, Dr. Ioan Sauca, to rename the *Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* henceforth *Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity*....

Our collective memory is alas rather short!

We forget all too quickly that the “Decade to Overcome Violence” culminated in the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation on Just Peace at Kingston/Jamaica. During the tenth assembly at Busan it was therefore proposed to go on a “Pilgrimage of Just Peace” until the next assembly, on the basis of this multidimensional and widely supported new paradigm of Just Peace.

In Busan this was already ‘reduced’ to a “Pilgrimage of Justice **and** Peace”... and now it was even proposed to change this once more in a way that gave me the distinct feeling that this would be some kind of ‘devaluation’ of the paradigm of Just Peace. Moreover this new “Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity” carries with it the risk that it leads to a rather more inward perspective of the member churches of the WCC.

And that was not what was required by the assembly at Busan: the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace meant a new perspective of ecumenism, namely the ‘ecumenism of diaconia’. Of service to the world! It is about building Just Peace!

As testified to by my above analysis of the proceedings at Karlsruhe however, we certainly did dialogue on the basis of the paradigm of Just Peace when wrestling with questions of war and peace. This relativizes – partly - my worries the second day of the assembly **and** the proposal to give the Pilgrimage a different focus.

Next to the above quoted statements other important statements were agreed upon at Karlsruhe. Like the rather more theological ‘Unity Statement’ and the powerful statement on climate change and sustainability (‘The Living Planet; Seeking a Just and Sustainable Global Community’), which I did not discuss in any detail here. All statements can be found on the website of the WCC.

### **Moving moments.**

When asked what touched me most during this assembly I recall two moments in particular. One was the contribution/greeting of the Secretary-General of Religions for Peace., Professor Azza Karam. About theme of the assembly she said that in her conviction the love of Christ for the whole world was also meant for her as a Moslima. As far as she was concerned Jesus had also died and was resurrected for her... Moreover she said that ‘Religions for Peace and the WCC shared the moral responsibility that we will not allow that religion is abused by politics to wage war. Politicians present war an option, but war is NO OPTION!’

I was really touched by her contribution.

The second was when – just like in Busan – a brother from Taizé (Fr. Alois) told us how in this ecumenical community – just like at the assembly – people from many different corners of the world come together to pray and worship.

He said: ‘We are all the guests of Christ’ and reminded us that ‘unity can never be achieved by concepts and words alone’... whereupon he invited us – *finally* – to have at least **one minute of silence**. Having observed silence he invited us to sing together “Laudate omnes gentes”.

That was one of those moments of ‘felt unity’ instead of ‘formulated unity’ for me! Archbishop Justin Welby in a session on Christian unity referred to this moment later by saying: *Our brother from Taizé said it all!*

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