

**Ecumenical Challenges in the Coming Decade  
9 April 2013, Budapest, Hungary**

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Your Eminences and Graces, heads of the Hungarian Churches,  
Dear colleagues and friends, sisters and brothers in Christ,

I want to thank the National Council of Churches in Hungary and its General Secretary Rev. Dr Vilmos Vischl and all WCC member Churches in Hungary as well as their leadership for the invitation to visit Hungary and especially for the invitation to speak on ecumenical challenges in the coming decade here in the beautiful city of Budapest, built on the famous river of Danube which unites Central and Eastern Europe, a region which is in itself an example for the ups and downs of history, of struggles and enmity, of hope and despair, and of new beginnings. I would like to speak today especially about the future of the ecumenical movement with its challenges and opportunities. I would like to speak about our struggle for ecumenical solidarity and visible unity and the difficulties and chances that we are going to face in the next decades.

**1. Shaping change in sharing the vision of God's reign to come**

I invite you to reflect a little on how I previously described Eastern Europe. In many ways that description applies for entire Europe and the world. Our continent shows that the context and expressions of Christianity have changed over the centuries and will continue to do so. This is for certain. And while we can speak about trends that we encounter and that we believe will be crucial for the coming ten years, we also know that change can also happen as a surprise, brought about by sudden events. Your country, Hungary, and my country, Norway, for example, share the experience of the catastrophe of the Second World War; but, we also remember the day when our countries were free again and people were full of hope for the future and ready to shape it--and so they did, contributing to peace and reconciliation in the continent of Europe.

When you open and read the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of St. John, you find yourself in the midst of very dramatic changes. Persecuted and marginalized Christians of the first century confront violence and injustice surrounding them. But against the pressure of these terrible circumstances, their hope is strengthened by remembering the one who came to reconcile and renew this world through his death on the cross and his resurrection. In all the ups and downs of history, they identify the presence of the one who will come to restore life and renew it. And so they try to anticipate this future through their lives and witness. We are called to give account of the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). Faith in God's reign to come embodied by the Church as the community of believers has been at many occasions an encouragement to overcome hopelessness and despair in the face of overwhelming powers.

In this context we cannot do theology or be the church without a proper understanding of ecumenical theology and that no church can fully be church alone. Churches need to make themselves accountable to other churches in one multilateral fellowship that anticipates the unity in the one body of Christ as *koinonia* or communion. Prof. Anton Houtepen from Utrecht, The Netherlands, a centre where many Hungarian theologians were educated, reminded us:

*“The unity of the Church and the Christian community – in the biblical sense of ‘koinonia’- are fundamentally based on the participation of all church members and of all churches in the one initiative of grace which God works in our human history. Amidst innumerable uncertainties and fears, doubts and longings, pain and struggle, the Christian Faith is an answer of trust, a password of hope against fatalism...It is a living practice of loving, caring, healing, guiding, rescuing helping people in their struggles, pains and fears ‘in the name of God’ and as ‘disciples of Jesus Christ’,”*

In this perspective, change we experience is only an element within the greater reality of the one initiative of God’s grace that brings about God’s reign. Therefore, we are called to engage with all forms of change as disciples of Jesus Christ. We know: change happens inevitably and sometimes as a surprise. Change, however, can and needs to be shaped proactively based on our best discernment of the situation, the Gospel values we stand for and in solidarity with those suffering. In the midst of all changes, our faith and commitment leads us to work for life in dignity and a just and sustainable world for generations to come.

This is how I would like you to understand my speech: an effort to discern the changing situation and to address it proactively through the World Council of Churches (WCC) - the WCC not understood as an organization based in Geneva, but as a fellowship of churches that encourage each other and hold each other accountable on their way. As members and representatives of churches in Hungary, I want to invite you to participate with the fellowship in this process of discernment and to take the opportunity to shape with us the future of the WCC through its forthcoming assembly.

The Busan assembly will set the framework for the coming 8 years until 2021. The theme chosen for this assembly is well suited for this task: “God of life, lead us to justice and peace”. It calls us to discern in the midst of our changing contexts and histories the God who gives and sustains life, the God of life who wants justice and peace to reign so that all may have life in fullness (John 10:10). We need each other for this process of discernment; we need each other to renew our hope and to encourage our common witness, individually and as the churches that are committed to acting together and holding each other accountable in the fellowship of the WCC.

I am aware that your churches and your country will host in July this year the assembly of the Conference of European Churches whose aim is also to listen to the member churches in order to reshape the ecumenical organization of our continent in a way that enables it to respond to the new European realities.

## **2. Changing contexts: from confusion to greater consensus**

Trying to identify the most important trends of the immediate past, present and future and how they impact the churches worldwide, we see that especially the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, including Hungary, the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the cold war have been crucial moments in recent history. All these events marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new. The political and economic division of Europe ended. The permanent threat of a “warm war” disappeared. Former communist countries started a long process of learning and building democracy. Many of them became members of NATO and of the European Union. East European churches escaped isolation and were able to be freely active in ecumenical organizations as well as to build relationships with churches from all around the world. However – and you know this very well because you experienced it directly- the end of the cold war and the process that I briefly described above brought a lot of challenges. A mixture of uncertainty coupled with the ongoing influence of mindsets that were shaped by the cold war led to tensions and confusions in the nineties of last century and in many ways still during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. East European countries and churches were massively confronted with the phenomenon of migration in both directions: while in the 90s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century many east Europeans left their countries, in the last years this phenomenon decreased in its intensity and the reality shows us that Eastern Europe started to be attractive for migrants coming from other parts of the world. We shall all agree that this complex phenomenon is a challenge equally for politicians, churches and the entire society. Multiple aspects defined by religion, human rights, religious freedom and other factors are involved.

The Committee on Ecumenism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that was initiated by the 2006 WCC assembly in Porto Alegre, however, observed, that consensus was growing in the last five to ten years concerning the analysis of the geopolitical and economic context, the changing interreligious and ecclesial landscape and the decisive role of information technologies, modern media and new forms of networking facilitated by them. The analysis that I am sharing with you is to a large extent based on the findings of this committee. I am, however, focusing on human rights, solidarity and mutual accountability as necessary emphasis in all three of these dimensions of change.

## **3. The changing geopolitical and ideological context**

Let me begin with the rapidly changing geopolitical and ideological context with critical challenges to the dominance of the United States and its allies through the emergence of powerful developing states such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa, forming together with Russia the BRICS group of countries. International negotiations are becoming more difficult with shifting international coalitions according to the interests of the major players. We are living in an ever more complex world. The international organizations, be it the UN or the WCC, are not only operating in an East-West or North-South perspective, but a globalized world which is in dire needs of common values and priorities which flow from the combined emphasis on human rights, solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and mutual accountability as state and non-state actors.

Unfortunately, the recent changes did not at all strengthen the capacity to address the major challenges humankind is facing at the beginning of the new millennium.

1. *Climate Change* is threatening life and survival on our planet, but negotiations on the next phase of the Kyoto Protocol are stalled and move rather backwards.
2. The Security Council which should help to build *peace and to prevent genocide and war* is again and again blocked by the veto of powerful member states; the responsibility to protect vulnerable populations has sometimes been misused, which further undermined trust in the multilateral international system.
3. The 2008 financial crises and its consequences have again exposed the weakness of the international financial system and the urgent need for *new international and national political frameworks for the economy*. On the European Union level, the financial crisis as it challenges the unity of this structure is about to build new divisions between Northern and Southern members, as well as between Eastern and Western members and put a lot of pressure on the relationships between EU and non-EU members.

It is obvious that we are far away of the kind of cooperation and common action that are urgently needed for overcoming the life threatening realities

In the face of these challenges, it is not the time to weaken the common voice of the churches at national, regional and international levels and the cooperation and interplay between them. What the churches have to say about Human Rights that protect the dignity and integrity of every human person, but that also include social obligations towards the other, they have to make public and known at all three of these levels so that governments at home, in their regional coordinating bodies, and in international negotiations hear the same message and are held accountable for what they are doing and for what they fail to do. What the churches have to say not only about human rights, but also about the integrity of God's creation and its close relationship to the rights of disempowered and marginalized people, for instance through developing the concept of Climate Justice, is vital for the future of life on our planet.

In view of these challenges and in response to the theme of the assembly, the last Central Committee meeting of the WCC called for a pilgrimage for justice and peace following the Busan assembly. The term pilgrimage reflects that finally the churches are guided by the vision of God's reign to come that has justice and peace for one human family and all of God's creation at the heart. Clear about the destination, not all pilgrims will take the same route. Coming from different places, their journey will lead them on different ways, but all committed to the same goal and values.

Further work and discussion are needed to develop this proposal, making it feasible and effective for change. The pilgrimage needs to be focused, well articulated and well coordinated. This requires some changes in the way how the churches cooperate through the WCC together with other actors in civil society. I will come back to that when I talk about new forms of networking and a changing working style of the WCC. Let me only mention here that the pilgrimage will benefit from the best possible cooperation between ACT Alliance and the specialized ministries and the WCC, respecting and clarifying further different roles and at the same time fostering common advocacy and action by churches

and their specialized ministries. The better we clarify distinctive profiles and complementary roles, the more effective such cooperation will be.

I am also convinced that embarking on a pilgrimage on justice and peace will also require further changes in the WCC secretariat. We can certainly build on the fruits of our work on climate change and water, on poverty and wealth, and the fruits of the International Peace Convocation with its emphasis on just peace. In addition and somehow undergirding these three areas, the WCC must have the capacity to articulate a theology of the public space coupled with more sophisticated analysis of the international arena in close cooperation with UN based and academic think tanks. I hope that developing these capacities will also reinforce the WCC as an open space of dialogue where conflicts are not avoided, but may be identified and worked through in the spirit of consensus. There is a new generation of theologians who are no longer influenced by the ideological confrontations of the cold war era, but reflect on the a critical, liberative and, at best, prophetic role of the churches in rapidly changing societies in all continents. This must be one of the key competences of the WCC in the future.

As WCC general secretary, I pay special attention to the relationship with the Regional Ecumenical Organizations. I shall mention here the way WCC-CEC relationships have developed in the last period for the good of our member churches.

#### **4. Changing interreligious relationships**

Let me now concentrate on the second major challenge: the changing interreligious relationships. As general secretary of the WCC, I am daily confronted with messages of Christians and their churches of the crises regions of this world. Every day we make sure that their voices are being heard and that they find churches ready to accompany and support them in their advocacy. Unfortunately, reactions against the globalisation of the consumer culture and the fragility of countries and even entire regions have increasingly triggered tensions and violence between different religious groups.

Recognizing that inter-religious dialogue and cooperation are difficult to sustain in the acute crises situation, it has become even more urgent to strengthen relationships and cooperation with representatives of other religions. We also have to be aware that the United Nations and other international bodies will make inter-religious cooperation and commitment to human rights more and more of an obligation for all of the partners they are cooperating with in the future. Indeed, there is and will be no important concern at the international level that will not require inter-religious competences to be effective with lasting impact. We should also not underestimate that in many cities around the world inter-religious councils were and continue to be established. Churches often combine today responsibilities for ecumenism and inter-religious relations in their headquarters, perhaps recognizing that in cooperation with communities of other religions, differences and diversity among Christians are seen again in another perspective. Christians are challenged to emphasize what they share in common instead of exaggerating the differences.

Against this background, the WCC has been changing its approach to inter-religious dialogue and cooperation in recent years. Among other initiatives, we have also undertaken an inter-

religious pilot project on reconciliation through social justice and decent work together with the International Labour Organisation. I have personally strengthened my own relationships with Jewish and Muslim leadership and their organizations. An important step forward was last year's mission to Nigeria together with Prince Ghazi Muhammad of Jordan and with the involvement of Cardinal John Onaiyekan. I have also visited Pakistan, Indonesia and other countries to build trust in the activities of the WCC and develop partner relationships for the future.

Again this situation suggests new forms of cooperation between churches through the WCC and changes in working style and emphasis of the WCC secretariat. I want you to know that I am committed to strengthen the inter-religious profile and capacity of the WCC and I count on your cooperation and support to achieve this goal.

## **5. The changing ecclesial landscape**

The changing ecclesial landscapes is probably the best documented, analyzed and constructively shaped area of the main trends and challenges confronting the ecumenical movement at present and in the years to come. The centennial celebrations of the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference were designed as a platform for wider participation beyond the existing boundaries of the ecumenical movement. The accompanying study materials improved our knowledge of the changing ecclesial landscape considerably. Another milestone was the successful formation of the Global Christian Forum, and new levels of cooperation between WCC, the World Evangelical Alliance and Pentecostal churches in the areas of mission, education, and ecumenical relations. One of the most notable results was, for instance, the document on *Christian Witness in a Multireligious World* that was jointly produced and presented to the public by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Evangelical Alliance and the WCC. Some Pentecostal theologians and representatives of other religions were involved in the process before.

It is often ignored that the WCC includes already some Pentecostal member churches— as your National Council of Churches does— and has opened up to Evangelicals and charismatic churches. The WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) provides a very productive and creative environment for cooperation with and involvement of Evangelicals and Pentecostals who are members of the commission. The relationships have grown in the preparatory phase of the Edinburgh Centennial, but continue to be developed together by all partners. Evangelicals and Pentecostals have also been involved in the Commission on Faith and Order.

In order to strengthen the theological basis for growth of relationships in the future, it is important that Faith and Order together with CWME gives increasing importance to theological questions arising in the context of these relationships. Let me share with you here that we are exploring the feasibility of a Faith and Order World Conference in 2017 focusing on renewal. The theme of renewal is a promising entry point to foster dialogue between very different church traditions and their formative stories and experiences.

Today, representatives of the different churches and organizations are ready to remember again that Evangelicals and the Pentecostal Assemblies of God have all been members of the World Missionary Council before it joined the WCC. Interest is growing on all sides to overcome the tensions of the past and to find new forms of cooperation. This is also in the interest, for instance, of the churches in South Korea that have been divided between evangelicals and ecumenicals for decades. The Global Christian Forum (GCF) which was initiated by the WCC after the 1998 Harare assembly has become an accepted and trusted meeting space where new relationships between Orthodox, Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants, Evangelicals and especially classical Pentecostals can be fostered. Classical Pentecostals have also joined in various countries (for instance in Norway and South Korea) councils of churches and are engaged in intensive cooperation with the WCC programme on Ecumenical Theological Education. Neo Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, however, are still difficult to relate to – also for the GCF. While recognizing the value of the GCF, this is one of the reasons not to overemphasize its role and to overburden it with partly unrealistic expectations.

WCC and GCF are moving forward together in complementary roles. The GCF is needed now as a space to explore new ecumenical avenues. It is not established to be a permanent structure. The WCC is necessary for committed cooperation between churches in their search for unity and ready for common action and witness in the world, for the accompaniment of churches in situations of crisis, and their common voice in the international arena. This leads me to the last of the four major challenges for the ecumenical movement in the next ten years.

## **6. Information technologies, media and new forms of networking**

The exponential development of information technologies and modern media in the last decades has been and continues to be one of the most important factors of change. The process of globalization that left its imprint on perceptions of this world, changed pattern of relationships and revolutionized the value bases of societies would have been impossible without the leap in production, transport and communication technologies facilitated and driven by information technologies.

The process of globalization and new possibilities of e-mail and internet communication also fostered the explosive growth of non-governmental organizations and the emergence of new dynamic actors in civil society. Providing the means for direct and in-time communication over long distances, it also facilitated new forms of networking and cooperation. There are two basic models that have developed: networks either concentrate on particular issues – which allows for the co-operation of a broad coalition of different actors - or they concentrate on one set of actors with the ability to address a broader agenda. The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) is an example of the first approach; the ACT Alliance is an example of the second approach

These developments had important consequences for the WCC. Geneva had been for decades the unchallenged hub and ecumenical centre at the international level. This position was called into question in various ways:

1. More intense conflicts concerning values and ethical choices had divisive impact also on churches and the relationships among them; it also affects the common understanding of human rights.
2. The general cultural backlash against globalization was mirrored by stronger denominational and parochial tendencies among the churches.
3. At the other end of the spectrum developed a post-modern pick and choose mentality.
4. While contradicting each other, all of these tendencies weakened the commitment of churches for the goal of visible unity and their readiness to sustain the financial support of ecumenical organizations in times of financial crisis.
5. The further diversification of ecumenical actors with partly competing objectives added to these difficulties.

It was important for the WCC secretariat to accept these changes and to rethink its roles and functions for member churches, ecumenical partners and the wider ecumenical movement. The Common Understanding and Vision process laid the groundwork for a new self-understanding of the WCC in response to these challenges. It highlighted that the WCC is not first of all an organization, but the fellowship of its member churches. It made clear, that WCC is not and will not claim to be the centre of the ecumenical movement, but is among all other ecumenical instruments best placed to work for the coherence of the ecumenical movement and the deepening and broadening of the fellowship. These reflections led further to a clearer articulation of the roles and functions of the WCC. The WCC is called to give leadership to the ecumenical movement through its convening role, the common voice it can muster, the ecumenical cooperation it can ensure and the contribution to greater coherence of the ecumenical movement through intensifying relationships and cooperation among member churches and with ecumenical partners. However, this can only happen if the WCC itself is a fellowship with substantial programmes and offering spaces for building of thick relationships, to explore and to exercise this role of leadership. In this way the common ground of the ecumenical movement is build through years of work and building a platform for common values.

The WCC implemented this approach by convening all who need to interact and to talk to each other in one ecumenical space or around one table. The Continuation Committee on Ecumenism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The WCC Assembly Discernment Committee and the Assembly Planning Committee have been examples of both the willingness of the WCC to fulfill this convening role and the readiness of ecumenical partners to recognize the WCC in these roles.

I started a re-focusing process which took nothing for granted, but reviewed all areas of work. Was the WCC really the best placed actor to do this work or were there others who could do it better? What was the added value for the involvement of the WCC at the international level? Could the member churches and ecumenical partners take ownership of the work? In which way did the work reflect and embody ecumenical vision and lead to greater commitment? It was really about a profound change of culture and working style of



the organization. I begin to see the first fruits in our assembly preparations and the strategic planning for the post-assembly period.

## **7. Following the way of Christ**

We have concluded long lasting processes like the Faith and Order consensus statement on *The Church. Towards a Common Vision*. We have renewed our understanding of mission in today's world through a new mission statement that is widely discussed and commented on. We are in the process of constructing a new approach to international affairs and prepare ourselves for an action focus on justice and peace if the assembly decides to embark on a *pilgrimage for justice and peace*.

We have come a long way and we will continue our journey, following the way of Christ as his disciples. Our assembly theme is guiding us in our way forward: "*God of life, lead us to justice and peace*".

During my travels and encounters with people and churches in different parts of the world and with religious and political leaders of many nations, I have discovered again and again the deep meaning and relevance of this theme, not only for Christians, but for all human beings caring for each other and the future of life for the *Oikoumene*. The whole inhabited earth.

Talking about God as the giver and source of life, we look at life as an inter-dependent whole. The unity we strive for – unity of the churches and for humankind – is God's gift, keeping the diverse expressions of life together. The gift of life is to be received and not to be torn apart and destroyed in the race for individual gains that reflects human greed. The great Mahatma Gandhi was clear: "Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's needs, but not for everyone's greed."

The theme opens the horizon of faith beyond any individual, or just my own community and church, towards creation as God's household of life and, indeed, the entire cosmos. All life is created and sustained by God, and is healed and reconciled through the death and resurrection of Christ.

As much as the cross of Golgotha is a reminder of the torture and painful death of Christ, it is a sign of God's deep solidarity with our suffering and God's desire for life in fullness, marked by justice and peace, for everyone. In the solidarity of the cross, we are called as Christ's disciples to bring signs of new life into the midst of suffering and signs of hope into the midst of despair.

The theme speaks with a sense of urgency to the contexts marked by injustice, violence and war. God wants life to be qualified by peace with justice. Where death overshadows the light of hope for dignified life in community and the cries of suffering and mourning silence the songs of joy and celebration of life, we are called to turn to God and struggle for justice and peace.

I hear and sense the expectations of the many member churches for the forthcoming assembly and the future work of the WCC. The theme speaks to the situation when I sit and listen to the challenges to define the role of the church in Papua, overcoming violence and comforting the suffering. I hear this when I meet with representatives for Indigenous Peoples or First Nations in Canada, discussing the role of the churches in the past and the hope of their contribution to life with justice and peace for the future. I hear this when we reflect on the role of the church in rebuilding a nation in Armenia: How can the values of the church – through the ages – bring a vision that ensures both justice and peace? I hear this when I discuss with leaders from the churches, labour movements and the environmentalists in Germany: How can we steward our contributions so that we serve the life our planet and our life together as humanity? How can the fellowship of churches bring a global vision that can guide these efforts? I hear this when we meet with victims of terror and violence in Nigeria, whether they are Muslims and Christians; they long for processes that lead to a real combination of justice and peace. I hear this receiving in the e-mail messages I receive from Christians from Syria who call for tangible solidarity of Christian churches worldwide and are yearning for peace to come. And I see this now when the tensions between South and North Korea are escalating and moving dangerously close to nuclear war.

I hear all these expectations and the hope that they will be heard and responded to by the fellowship of churches that gathers as the WCC. Despite all difficulties and challenges, this is what shows me that the WCC is needed also today and has a mission for the future.