

# Ecumenical Conversations

## What are ecumenical conversations?

The assembly, as a whole, provides space for celebration, dialogue and reflection through common prayer, Bible studies, thematic plenaries, ecumenical conversations, business sessions, workshops, the *madang* exhibition and the weekend pilgrimage with the Korean churches.

Ecumenical conversations, in particular, engage assembly participants in sustained, in-depth dialogue on critical issues that affect the unity, mission and witness of the church today – issues that require a common response by the churches together. The results of the conversations will help to guide future ecumenical cooperation.

There are 21 ecumenical conversations. Each conversation focuses on a unique topic and provides four ninety-minute sessions for sustained dialogue. Each conversation has between 80 and 120 participants. Participants are asked to choose one conversation in advance and to commit to being present for all four sessions.

Ecumenical conversations follow consensus procedures and use methodologies that seek to inform, engage and promote dialogue. Conversations will include:

- input and sharing on the topic from participants and resource persons;
- presentation of different viewpoints from participants and resource persons;
- discussion and debate among the participants; and
- a harvest of affirmations and challenges that are relevant for future ecumenical cooperation.

Each ecumenical conversation is moderated by a delegate and supported by leadership team nominated from among the delegates, delegated representatives, delegated observers, observers and advisors. The team is responsible for leading the conversation and preparing the report.

While ecumenical conversations are open to all participants, they serve to deepen the dialogue between member church delegates. The delegates have a particular responsibility for agreeing to the affirmations and challenges that should be put forward to the churches. The delegates are resourced by many other participants, representing other churches, ecumenical partners, congregations and local experiences. While every attempt will be made to encourage the active participation of all participants, member church delegates have a particular role and responsibility in ecumenical conversations.

All ecumenical conversations are asked to prepare a short narrative report (3-4 pages) that includes ecumenical affirmations and challenges to be addressed by the churches, ecumenical partners and the World Council of Churches (WCC). The reports will be made available to participants, churches and partners. The reports will be submitted to the WCC central committee at its first full meeting after the assembly in 2014 for consideration and appropriate action.

The success or failure of each conversation depends on the genuine and committed encounter among the participants. At times this may be difficult, but it will serve the process of spiritual discernment and provide a better understanding of how people experience the world and how the church, by working together, can promote life, justice and peace for all.

## **The theme and the church**

“God of life, lead us to justice and peace” – the assembly theme – is both a prayer and a statement of faith addressing contemporary trends, urgent challenges and threats to life from the perspective of faith in the Triune God.

The world we live in belongs to the God of life, who created it, who redeemed it through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and who continues transforming it through the power of the Holy Spirit, so that God’s justice and peace may reign. This is God’s promise of life in fullness for all creation (John 10:10; Eph. 1; Col.1; Rev. 22).

God takes the initiative in all things. The new humanity in Christ, renewed by God’s grace, is commissioned to take part in God’s healing and transformation of the world (1 Cor. 3.9). The *koinonia*, *martyria* and *diakonia* (unity, mission and service)

of the church are synergistic acts by which Christians participate through prayer, fellowship, common witness and action in the work of God's love.

As followers of Christ, we are drawn into the movement of God's love with the marginalized, the persecuted and the suffering creation (Luke 4; Rom. 8). Responding to God's mission of life, the church is called to be one in Christ (John 17:21) and to bear witness to the reign of God's justice and peace for all who share the gift of life in God's household, the *oikoumene* (Pss. 9:9; 19:5; 24:1; Matt. 24:14; Acts 17:31; Heb. 1.6, 2:5).

## **Contemporary challenges for the churches' unity, mission and service**

In the light of the theme, the assembly gathers to analyze the impact of contemporary trends and threats to life on people and the planet and to discern the role of the churches and the ecumenical movement in responding with care for God's creation.

The process of globalization significantly marked the period between the Harare and Porto Alegre assemblies, i.e., between 1998 and 2006. While the process of globalization is on-going and continues to provoke varied reactions, other dimensions of the present situation should be highlighted:

- changing geopolitical context and shifting power configurations with new opportunities, but also new emerging tensions and conflicts;
- persistent poverty and growing inequality, which are further aggravated by the consequences of the financial crisis on people, communities, nations and the churches themselves;
- devastating reality of climate change;
- growing numbers of migrants, with a high percentage of Christians among them;
- the influence of information technologies and new media, and its impact on social and political change;
- pressing challenges for inter-religious relations in many parts of the world;
- changing ecclesial and ecumenical landscapes, with the continued growth of Pentecostal, charismatic and independent churches especially in the global south; and
- changing social patterns and the varied responses of the churches.

What are the consequences of such rapid change, and how do these challenges affect the call to be one, so that the world may believe – the call to be the church together in the world today? How do these challenges affect the churches' unity in faith; mission and evangelism; witness for justice and peace; commitment to theological education; and interreligious dialogue and cooperation?

The assembly programme, and the ecumenical conversations in particular, are constructed to facilitate dialogue, reflection and responses to these questions. The topics covered by ecumenical conversations address a plethora of related issues, including what it means to be the church, common prayer, Christian discipleship,

the community of women and men, theological education, inter-religious cooperation, human rights and security, economic and ecological justice, peace-building, health and healing, *diakonia* and development.

## **Descriptions of the ecumenical conversations**

### *EC-01. Called to be one: new ecumenical landscapes*

Two of the most important factors in the emergence of new ecumenical realities have been the growth of Pentecostal, charismatic, neo-charismatic and non-denominational churches and the impact of globalization on the economic, political, cultural and religious spheres of different societies.

These developments raise questions, but they also offer opportunities for new initiatives for the unity of the Church and for strengthening common witness and service in new forms of cooperation and action. This applies to bilateral and multilateral relationships between churches within and beyond WCC membership, the Global Christian Forum, as well as other conciliar ecumenical organizations (regional ecumenical organizations and national councils), confessional bodies (Christian world communions) and specialized ministries, e.g., church-based or -related mission and development agencies (Christian service).

The assembly theme invites common efforts for unity, mission and service in the pursuit of justice and peace. The purpose of this ecumenical conversation is to assess the contemporary situation and its challenges; to reflect on its theological, relational and institutional dimensions; and to propose steps for further exploring the potential for the ecumenical movement in mutually enriching partnerships.

### *EC-02. The Church: toward a common vision*

What can we say together today about Christ's Church so that we may grow in communion, struggle together for life, justice and peace in today's world, and overcome our past and present church divisions? This question – vital to the future of the ecumenical movement and of the WCC – was the subject of the long process that led to the newly released WCC/Faith and Order convergence statement *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

This ecumenical conversation will centre on this new text. It will engage participants in discerning the ecumenical breakthrough that it may represent and in raising critical questions about its ecumenical limits, and will equip them to promote its reception among the churches.

### *EC-03. Transformed by renewal: biblical sources and ecumenical perspectives*

*Renewal* in contemporary Christianity may suggest programmes for church growth and evangelization. Or it may refer to movements, such as charismatic and liturgical renewal, or even to the ecumenical movement itself as an expression of renewal. While all churches can recognize the biblical call to renewal, different experiences and expressions of renewal may also be church-dividing. What are the indicators of renewal: evangelism, prosperity, reform, restructuring, financial health, charismatic gifts, mission toward justice and peace, larger numbers of Christians, religious experience?

This ecumenical conversation seeks to reflect on the concept of renewal within contemporary Christianity. The goals of the ecumenical conversation are threefold: to assist the churches in articulating what renewal means from a theological perspective; to recognize and assess its authentic indicators pastorally; and to receive its fruits ecumenically. The conversation begins with biblical insights and reflects on different confessional and contextual experiences of renewal, as exemplified in the lives of churches around the world today.

*EC-04. Moral Discernment for life, justice and peace*

Moral discernment describes the process by which a person or a community responds to the dilemmas and questions that human beings face when seeking the “right” and the “good.” Therefore the task of moral discernment is an essential aspect of Christian life, not only for the individual but also for churches as a whole. Seeking to discover God’s will is becoming increasingly difficult in a world in which new technologies and new scientific insights raise new ethical issues and where different worldviews result in conflicting responses to moral questions.

This ecumenical conversation explores the sources and process of moral discernment as an *entrée* to ecumenical discussion of moral issues and differences. How can the churches help each other to make the world a place where human beings and all creation may live a life in justice and peace? More particularly: How can churches find better ways to discern the will of God?

*EC-05. We must pray together if we are to stay together*

Christians need to pray for unity, and this makes sense only if they pray together. This important statement points to a fundamental challenge for the fellowship of churches “on the way to visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, *expressed in worship* and in our common life in Christ.” Unfortunately, one of the factors that divide Christians is the matter of worship itself.

Ecumenical prayer does not claim to be the worship of any given member church, or of any kind of a hybrid church or super-church. It is in common prayer, perhaps more than in any other ecumenical work, that we encounter both the promise of God’s reconciliation and the pains of our divisions, not only in the fact that we cannot share the Eucharist, but also in different emphases in worship and in different gestures and customs which make us feel strangers in other churches.

This ecumenical conversation asks: How can we as churches and as a fellowship of churches pray together, and on which theological and ecclesiological grounds? Do we pray together if attending each other’s confessional worship? What does “ecumenical” prayer entail?

*EC-06. Developing effective leadership: contextual ecumenical formation and theological education*

Ecumenical theological education and formation, resting on core moral and spiritual values of the churches, is vital for the future of the ecumenical movement and the integrity of Christian mission. It not only preserves the ecumenical memory but more importantly develops responsible and conscious agents of change within communities, churches and civil society. But how is this to be done today? The search for

creative, inclusive and transforming leadership is rooted in the prayer “God of life, lead us to justice and peace.”

This ecumenical conversation takes up the constitutional mandate of the WCC to “nurture the growth of an ecumenical consciousness through processes of education and a vision of life in community rooted in each particular cultural context.” It examines how contextual ecumenical formation and education can strengthen leadership in the churches. What role can the ecumenical movement, and in particular the WCC, play in strengthening contextual ecumenical formation and education in the coming years?

*EC-07. Together towards life: mission in changing contexts*

Empowered by the life-giving Spirit, God’s mission aims at affirmation of the fullness of life. Acknowledging the need to re-define the concepts of mission in rapidly changing ecclesial and ecumenical landscapes, the WCC adopted in 2012 a new mission affirmation, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*. This ecumenical conversation will engage in further work to give impetus and encouragement to ecumenical mission work and to implement new mission thinking in the various aspects, contexts and venues of mission.

At the conversation, participants will discuss study and policy guidelines, as well as training modules on the statement for three target audiences: local congregations and mission groups; national mission boards and global mission bodies; and missiology students and missionary trainees. This practical guide to the statement aims to offer signposts that can help participants discern the action of the Spirit in the world – and to bring the document into everyday use in the life of the churches and among agents of mission.

*EC-08. Evangelism today: new ways for authentic discipleship*

Evangelism is the invitation to authentic discipleship in a new life in Christ. It is at the heart of God’s mission and the missional dimension of every local church. Within today’s secular, multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts, churches have a pivotal role in the rediscovery of God’s mission for the fullness of life, searching for new ways of authentic discipleship.

This ecumenical conversation aspires to address key challenges in how evangelism can best witness to the good news for people of all cultures in diverse contextual settings. Today’s challenging opportunity to live out authentic witness necessitates the development of new means of discipleship in Christ, always oriented toward promotion of the healing and reconciling message of the gospel, guided by life-affirming values for the promotion of the common good.

*EC-09. Community of women and men in the church: mutual recognition and transformative justice*

The church, as a prophetic sign in today’s world, is called to embody a true community of women and men. Such an inclusive community is God’s gift and promise for humanity, being created “in God’s image,” male and female (Gen 1:27). To enliven this ideal during the 10th Assembly, this ecumenical conversation will create a space to explore how “what we are, we ought to become” (Philip Potter). It will be a space

for celebrating and furthering the 60 years of women's active praxis for a just community of women and men in the church. While acknowledging the still-existing challenges to becoming this community, there will also be a call for mutual accountability in different ministries of the church as to how we have been or not have been a community of women and men. Echoing the assembly theme, the ecumenical conversation will also be a call to transformative justice in response to the often-acknowledged backlash to the gains that the ecumenical movement made through the earlier agency of the ecumenical foremothers.

Through various methodologies the ecumenical conversation will explore these questions: In what ways has the church been a community of women and men? What have been the existing challenges to the called-to-be-one church's vision of being and living as a community of women and men? What programmes, concrete actions and theologies should the churches, the ecumenical movement and ecumenical partners design and engage with so as to make sure that the call to unity for justice and peace is pursued together as a just and inclusive community of women and men? How can the ecumenical process of building a community of women and men better enhance the "cross-fertilisation" advocacy process with the UN CSW?

*EC-10. Exploring Christian self-identity in a world of many faiths*

In the twenty-first century, Christians in many different contexts and parts of the world need to articulate their faith in conversation with people who are followers of other religions. This conversation will reflect on a number of central Christian themes (such as our understanding of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, creation, salvation, the Bible and the church). Though Christian thinking and practice about such issues may be challenged as we engage with people of other religions, it can also be a creative undertaking, encouraging us to return to the roots of our faith and to reflect more deeply, discovering Christian insights speaking directly to this religiously plural world.

This ecumenical conversation will seek to be a space for holding a genuine conversation in which different views on serious questions about the relationship between Christianity and other religions may be expressed courteously, heard graciously and honoured. The conversation will draw as a resource on the consultations organized over the last decade by the WCC in the area of "Christian self-understanding in the context of religious plurality." It will also act as a springboard for future interreligious work, integrating both theological and practical dimensions.

*EC-11. Bonded with the Marginalised for a just and inclusive church and world*

Discrimination and marginalization of people on the basis of their colour, ethnicity, caste, gender, disabilities and other factors have always been matters of concern for churches everywhere. This has resulted in a variety of diaconal initiatives and advocacy for their rights and justice. In fact, such engagement has given visibility, relevance and purpose to the churches and ecumenical organizations, including the WCC.

This ecumenical conversation will attempt to address some of the major hesitations and inhibitions that churches encounter in responding to marginalized groups. It will also search for creative possibilities for churches' effective presence and witness

in an increasingly unjust and exclusionary world. In addressing these issues, churches have an opportunity to become truly alternative communities, holding forth the promise of the coming reign of God. The conversation will draw from the experiences and resources of those who are struggling against racism, casteism, and for Indigenous people, people with disabilities, people forced to migrate or flee and those in migrant churches.

*EC-12. A call to ecological justice and peace in the face of climate change*

Climate change is one of the major threats humanity is facing today. The increase of frequency and intensity of tropical storms, droughts and floods, the rise of sea levels and the change in weather patterns are some of the symptoms of the climate crisis affecting peoples and earth. Vulnerable communities in various parts of the world are already experiencing the most severe consequences of a crisis which has global implications.

This ecumenical conversation will look at what churches, civil society and the international community are doing to address climate change and ecological destruction. It will discuss the ethical, spiritual and theological dimensions of the crisis and will put forward proposals for action contributing to the ecumenical pilgrimage for justice and peace.

*EC-13. Economy of life: overcoming greed to eradicate poverty*

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). This saying of Jesus hints at the perennial challenge of relating Christian discipleship to the larger economic environment in which the human good is or is not realized. Greed and injustice are at the root of the intertwined economic, social and ecological crises that continue to cause immense suffering, especially among the already impoverished and vulnerable. In response, churches are calling for an “Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All,” a vision in which poverty is eradicated, inequality and greed are challenged, and creation is cared for.

The ecumenical conversation will address the following key question: How can churches inspire a pilgrimage toward justice and peace with a focus on an economy of life, witness to a “spirituality of enough” as well as contribute to transforming the current climate of greed, materialism and consumerism? A major focus will be the introduction of greed indicators and alternative definitions of well-being, crucial to evolving an economy of life.

*EC-14. Human security: sustaining peace with justice and human rights*

Human rights and freedom from violence are now often described together as *human security*. Human security is increasingly recognized as a basic right for all people, since it is essential for sustaining peace with justice and upholding human dignity. Human security views every person as deserving of fundamental freedoms and universal rights for all, a vital security matter. Security itself is seen within the conditions of freedom from pervasive threats to people’s rights, their safety and their right to peaceful lives. The agenda for human security for sustaining peace with justice and human rights should ensure fullness of life, an idea deeply rooted in the biblical concept of *shalom*.

This ecumenical conversation will analyze and reflect on different pertinent issues related to human security within the context of peace with justice and human rights in emerging geo-political contexts. The conversation will also discuss the interrelatedness of human security and human rights, sharpening the theological undergirding of God's call for prophetic witness.

*EC-15. The way of just peace: building peace together*

What do we mean by "just peace"? The search for Christian unity includes a standing invitation for churches to become more united for peace. Yet political, theological and practical divisions persist. Churches are deeply divided or silent on even the greatest threats to peace. Nation and culture often are classified by creed and compassion. But projections of power and lifestyle on a global scale now pose new challenges to witness and service in church and society.

This conversation will explore how churches at different levels are motivated and equipped to build peace. It will tap rich biblical, ecumenical and other resources using the inter-disciplinary approach of just peace. It will provide space to debate global issues that call Christians toward the more dynamic unity required if we are to become credible witnesses for peace today. It will draw from the discussions new pathways for churches committed to building peace together, in faith.

*EC-16. Religions working together for peace and freedom*

After addressing the question of the ambiguous relationship between religion and both peace and freedom, this ecumenical conversation will explore different models of interreligious engagement. It will facilitate a candid and creative engagement with the problematic aspects of religions, especially in relation to the themes of peace and freedom, in order to engender interreligious collaboration so that humanity may flourish.

This ecumenical conversation will juxtapose situations of strife and conflict between religions (as in Nigeria and Pakistan - Christian and Muslim) with instances of religions working alongside each other as peace-builders (as in Korea and Sri Lanka - Buddhists and Christians) to articulate critical challenges and creative possibilities for interreligious peace-building and fostering freedom.

*EC-17. The Korean peninsula: ecumenical solidarity for justice and peace*

Taking into consideration the broader implications and impact of tensions on the Korean peninsula for North East Asia and other parts of the world, this ecumenical conversation will seek to explore the lessons learned from initiatives to date. It will then explore the issues, challenges and obstacles that should be addressed by the ecumenical movement as a whole, and specifically by the WCC.

This ecumenical conversation will work to identify specific areas for partnership among churches, as well as with governmental and non-governmental organizations, and regional and global ecumenical organizations. The ultimate aim is to promote and strengthen ecumenical accompaniment for building justice and peace on the Korean peninsula, which can foster reconciliation with a vision toward eventual reunification.

*EC-18 “Middle East”: whose justice, what peace?*

In the last three years the Middle East has experienced a new wave of conflicts. This ecumenical conversation will focus on the multiple causes of conflict and examine the different theologies that inform the conflict and attempt to understand them. It will also explore ways in which the churches in the region and in the wider ecumenical arena could come together, work together and witness together for the cause of a just peace in the region.

*EC-19. Churches’ advocacy for children’s rights*

Children are a blessing from God, and churches, families and communities are called to nurture and protect them. But many children in every part of the world are at risk, particularly as a result of a neoliberal globalized economy, violence and conflict. Children are among the most vulnerable victims of injustice, poverty and abuse. Furthermore, children have been abused even within the churches.

The basic objective of this ecumenical conversation is to heighten understanding of the situation of children both in the churches and society. It is expected that it will lead to recommendations from the participants for development of an action plan promoting the protection of children’s rights, prophetic witness on their behalf and advocacy for the participation of children themselves as agents for peace and justice.

*EC-20. Ecumenical health and healing ministries*

Health and healing ministries work through a variety of institutions. The churches, Christian healthcare providers, pastoral counsellors and ecumenical advocacy networks and institutions work to bind together issues of justice, peace and fullness of life. For instance, many efforts are being implemented to address the root causes of the HIV pandemic and to facilitate healthcare services, including palliative care. Other Christian ministries address deep-seated trauma, which has been recognized as one of the major causes of mental-health diseases. In many parts of the world barriers still exist to quality of life, justice, peace and affordable healthcare services, often a matter of life and death. This conversation will strategize as to how churches, Christian healthcare providers, ecumenical health networks, secular international agencies like the World Health Organization and UNAIDS and national governments can work together to restore dignity, justice and health in communities.

This conversation will identify ways of creating and/or strengthening ecumenical partnerships for life and for churches to call each other to health and healing ministries.

*EC-21. Compelled to serve: diakonia and development in a rapidly changing world*

The global context in which churches and specialized agencies work for solidarity and sustainable development is rapidly changing and significantly affects how we engage in sustainable development through *diakonia* (Christian service). These changes include new demographics (youth); communication technologies; geo-political-financial power shifts; the private sector and military as new actors; changed global development architecture; shrinking political space for civil society; interreligious opportunities and challenges; neo-liberal economics and climate change. Responses

of the ecumenical movement in the past that have effectively provided solidarity, accompaniment and resources now require new thinking, new approaches and new patterns of cooperation.

This conversation invites deep analysis of this changing development paradigm, in which the ecumenical movement is compelled to engage and to witness for and serve God. The sessions will provide a space for theological, ecclesiological and practical reflection on how these change factors affect churches and specialized agencies. Focus will be on the risks, opportunities and new patterns of cooperation. A foundational document is “Theological Perspectives on *Diakonia* in the Twenty-First Century.”