



World Council of Churches

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## Unity Statement

### Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity<sup>1</sup>

#### Preface

1. We – the fellowship of the WCC – live and witness in a world which is at the same time God's beautiful creation and broken by ecological crisis, war, pandemic, systemic poverty, racism, gender-based violence, human rights violations, and many other sufferings. Inspired by the theme of the assembly, this unity statement is written in a pastoral voice. It seeks to offer hope to the churches and the world in their situation. It is founded in confidence in God's indefatigable love and begins there, with the love that never abandons us. It reflects on the significance of that undaunted love, revealed in Christ and kindled by the Holy Spirit, for the ecumenical movement. It challenges the churches to live and pray for unity, inspired and encouraged by such a love as this. It challenges our churches also to commit to witness and work together to the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

#### United in Christ's love

2. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome:

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the *love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Rom. 8: 38-39)

Now, as through the ages, the love of God, freely, graciously, and unconditionally given, the communion of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, is working to defeat all those forces in the world that try to separate us from God, from one another and from creation. The love of God has been made manifest in the incarnation of his Son Jesus Christ: in his compassion for so many, in his washing of his disciples' feet, in his gift of a command to love even our enemies, and by his arms stretched out in love for the world as he gave his life on the cross. We see, in Christ, a love that never fails, that overcomes separation and brokenness.

#### The distinctive Christian call to love

3. In the earliest days of the Church, many wondered at the ways in which Christians lived and affirmed their faith. How is it, they asked then, that Christians have no fear, even of death? How do they have such

<sup>1</sup> Compare 2 Cor 5:11,21.

*affection* for each other? And where does their strikingly different way of living come from? In the second century, when Christians were particularly renowned for their willingness to stay with the many sick and dying, the author of *The Epistle to Diognetus*<sup>2</sup> declared that Christian life is “no mere earthly invention...or a mere human system of opinion,” but that it comes from the one love of God for humankind. The author says to the reader, “...how will you love God who has first so loved you? And if you love God, you will be an imitator of God’s kindness.”

4. In our times, that early Christian witness to God’s love challenges us to love now. We often fail to live up to this calling, and honest self-criticism and repentance are constantly needed. Church divisions remain. There are wars and conflicts between nations and peoples. Many countries and peoples continue to face colonialism, oppression and their legacies. The current pandemic has made the world’s inequalities more vivid, and creation faces a climate emergency. But the churches are rooted in a living faith that God makes us and gives us each a true dignity. We always look to the hope for a renewed future that is God’s eternal promise, and we are moved above all by the love of God that is constantly revealed in Jesus Christ. In these days, we hear and proclaim the eternal Gospel message that “faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13: 13). It is love, above all, that is the inspiration, the foundation, the source of our ecumenical movement. It is in response to the love we have seen in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, that we are moved to search together for justice, reconciliation and unity based on the truth of our faith.

5. Paul’s call magnifies the message of the earlier chapters of his first letter to the Corinthians that eloquently describe how we are members together of the one body of Christ: by honest self-examination (11:28), by waiting for one another so that we eat at the same table (11:33), by receiving and honouring the variety of gifts of the one Spirit (12:4), and by celebrating the apostolic witness (12:28). And then Paul shows us the way of love. This is why we are affirming, at this 2022 assembly, that Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.

### **Today’s world**

6. The faithful, the people of the churches, with so many others around the world, are deeply affected by the pain of the times. The Covid-19 pandemic has separated families, deepened isolation and increased death rates. Many families are grieving and longing to be united. Intergenerational traumas strain relationships and societies. Violent conflicts and wars bring death and suffering to every continent. People are being cast out of their homelands by war, climate emergency, religious persecution and or the basic human need for food, security, and safety, and find themselves made often unwelcome refugees. Once again, in some places, Christians are killing each other.

7. We are facing many sins of profound injustice, such as casteism, racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, colonialism, economic exploitation, the unequal distribution of power and resources, and the corruption of our relationships with creation, alongside so many kinds of alienation. These sins push people apart from one another and suppress our God-given longing for recognition, connection, and communion. In a world like this, wounded by divisions, the churches are called to witness to the indestructible power of love to bring together and reconcile. Through the faith they proclaim in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the churches are called to bear a counter-cultural witness: the hope of unity, justice, and peace. And yet, despite Christ’s invitation to unity, the churches continue to remain divided. Amid this division, affecting both the world and the churches, Christ’s call to unity rings out even more profoundly.

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<sup>2</sup> The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), vol. 1 (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0101.htm>, accessed 4 September 2022), chapters 7, 10.

## Unity Statements on the way

8. Successive assemblies of the World Council of Churches have offered a statement or theme to inspire the churches to reflect on why they have chosen to journey together and the significance of the call to unity. As we recall what our predecessors said, we ask ourselves what we are being called to say in our own time.

9. The 1948 founding assembly in Amsterdam and the second assembly in Evanston in 1954 affirmed our oneness in allegiance to Christ, addressed the sin of persistent church divisions, and expressed hope that the churches might “stay together” in their imperfect fellowship.<sup>3</sup> According to the assembly of 1961 in New Delhi, the unity which is God’s will and gift to the Church is made visible when “all in each place” find reconciliation in the apostolic faith, sacramental life, ministry, and mission, and are united with all in all places and ages.<sup>4</sup>

10. Seven years later, in 1968, the Uppsala assembly approached the vision of unity from the perspective of catholicity as the quality by which the Church expresses the fullness, integrity, and totality of life in Christ. Catholicity is, therefore, “the opposite of all kinds of egoism and particularism.”<sup>5</sup> The assembly held together the unity of the Church and the unity of humanity, and called the churches to work for the time when “a genuinely universal council may once more speak for all Christians and lead the way into the future.”

11. The 1975 assembly in Nairobi took up the perspective of the assembly Uppsala on conciliarity in its vision of unity. The One Church, it stated, “is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united.”<sup>6</sup> From the assembly in Vancouver in 1983 came a reminder that visible unity has three marks: unity in apostolic faith, unity in the mutual recognition of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, and unity in common decision-making and teaching with authority.<sup>7</sup>

12. According to the 1991 assembly in Canberra, the unity of the Church understood as *koinonia* will be realized “when all churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church,” in such a way that “diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural ethnic or historical contacts are integral to the nature of communion.”<sup>8</sup> At the WCC’s 50th anniversary, the 1998 assembly in Harare urged the churches to call one another to “turn to God and rejoice in hope,” as they also reflected on the decade of churches in solidarity with women.<sup>9</sup>

13. All who have been baptized into Christ “are united with Christ in his body,” stated the text on ecclesiology “Called to be the One Church” adopted by the 2006 Porto Alegre assembly.<sup>10</sup> The Church as communion of believers “is created by the Word of God.” As the people of God, body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, “the Church is called to manifest its oneness in rich diversity.” In our present state of imperfect communion, “each church is called to mutual giving and receiving gifts and to mutual

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<sup>3</sup> W.A. Visser ’t Hooft, ed., *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (London: SCM, 1949), 51-57; W.A. Visser ’t Hooft, ed., *The Evanston Report* (London: SCM, 1955), 82-91.

<sup>4</sup> “New Delhi Statement on Unity” in *New Delhi speaks: the message of the Third Assembly, New Delhi, 18 November-5 December 1961, with the reports of the Assembly's sections on Christian witness, service and unity and an appeal to all governments and peoples* (London: SCM 1962; <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/new-delhi-statement-on-unity>, accessed 4 September 2022), 116-135.

<sup>5</sup> M.- Goodall, ed., “The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church,” in *The Uppsala 68 Report* (Geneva: WCC, 1968), 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Breaking barriers. Nairobi 1975. The official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1975; <https://archive.org/details/wcca17>, accessed 4 September 2022), PAGE REFERENCE.

<sup>7</sup> D. Gill, ed., *Gathered for Life – Official Report – VI Assembly World Council of Churches* (Geneva/Grand Rapids: WCC/Eerdmans, 1983), 43-45.

<sup>8</sup> *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling - The Canberra Statement* (<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-unity-of-the-church-as-koinonia-gift-and-calling-the-canberrastatement>; accessed 4 September 2022).

<sup>9</sup> D. Kessler (ed.), *Together on the Way – Official Report of Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1999; <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/together-on-the-way-official-report-of-the-eighth-assembly>, accessed 4 September 2022), 242-248.

<sup>10</sup> *Called to be the One Church* (<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/called-to-be-the-one-church-as-adopted>, accessed 4 September 2022).

accountability” because “apart from one another we are impoverished.” Finally, the Busan 2013 assembly emphasized the unity of the Church as a sign and servant of God’s reconciling of all humankind, and indeed of the whole of creation itself, the whole inhabited earth.<sup>11</sup>

### **An ecumenism of the heart**

14. In this 2022 Assembly of the World Council of Churches, we now turn to celebrate and affirm the ways in which the quest for a true unity is always founded in love: the love of God revealed in Christ and lived in the Holy Spirit, a love that moves us, and moves the world, to reconciliation and unity. In these times, the vision of unity sometimes seems less clear than we would hope for and more difficult to pursue, but the call to unity is still urgent and compelling. The true goal of Jesus Christ, and with him all Christians, is to reach a visible fellowship, one in holy unity. The responses made by the churches to the Faith and Order text *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*<sup>12</sup> reveal that we now agree more than we disagree on many aspects of the apostolic faith, on much about our understanding of the sacraments and the imperative to serve God’s people in the world. There is a deep commitment to the goal of visible unity, a renewed focus on ecumenical spirituality and on ecclesiology that begins with baptism. There is a real, increasing convergence about the need to hold together the local and the universal in thinking about the Church, along with an evangelical passion for proclaiming the gospel together and sharing in the mission of God to the world.<sup>13</sup>

15. We understand this common commitment, as well as these convergences, to be visible signs of growth towards unity. Churches now ask how this growth might be made visible. There is a move amongst some to emphasize the experience of ecumenism more than formal agreements and a recognition that as we first walk together on our common pilgrimage of reconciliation and unity, we are then also led to reflect together on questions of faith and truth. The churches’ responses reveal a longing for an ecumenism in which we bring all of ourselves to the journey and to the table, not separating thought from prayer, prayer from action, or action from thought.<sup>14</sup>

16. There are profound challenges to our unity in these times. There remain questions about the limits of diversity in our understanding of unity, a request from many for some common criteria for discernment, particularly about moral questions, and a need to explore together the theological understanding of humankind. Some ecumenical conversations are difficult even to begin. Sometimes, even those in communion with each other are, tragically, at war. Many voices call for an ecumenism that can provide the challenge, inspiration, and courage that will move us to change.

17. Can we open our hearts so that Christ’s love may move us in ways that breathe new life into the search for full visible communion? And is this note of love, heard for the first time in this way at an assembly, one that will sound clearly also in the world?

18. The work of unity needs to be inspired anew by the love we have seen in Jesus Christ. It needs to begin with the love of the heart, the love that responds to Christ who said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). The love of Christ is the spiritual source of the ecumenical movement. It moves us to walk together, compels us to pray together, and urges us to respond to Christ’s invitation to be of one spirit and one mind. The quality

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<sup>11</sup> “Unity statement adopted by the WCC 10th Assembly on 8 November 2013” (<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/unity-statement>, accessed 4 September 2022).

<sup>12</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC, 2013; [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/The\\_Church\\_Towards\\_a\\_common\\_vision.pdf](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/The_Church_Towards_a_common_vision.pdf), accessed 4 September 2022).

<sup>13</sup> *What Are the Churches Saying About the Church? Key Findings and Proposals from the Responses to The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: WCC 2021; <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/what-are-the-churches-saying-about-the-church>, accessed 4 September 2022), 6-17.

<sup>14</sup> *What Are the Churches Saying About the Church?*, especially 17-19.

of the relationships between us and our churches will inspire our journey and our common work towards that full visible communion for which Christ prayed (John 17:20-23).

19. It is when we are kind to one another as churches, warmly welcoming of each other, building profound and evident friendship in sincerity and respect, when we are drawn to one another out of compassion, fascination, and longing for one another – across our differences and divisions – that we will find the grace to search for that common faith, the truth together held that will overcome our separation. Unity in apostolic faith, in sacramental life, in ministry, and in the work of sharing in common action together, all need our heads, hands, and feet, the whole of us, to be fully engaged (1 Cor. 12). But the vital search for agreement in faith, the working together in service to the world, the walking the way of discipleship together; all these are stirred by the love of Christ, who moves our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

20. The search for unity that is inspired by love and rooted in deep and mutual relationship may be termed an “ecumenism of the heart.” It is Christlike love that moves us to walk honestly and wholeheartedly beside one another, to try to see the world through the eyes of others and to have compassion for one another, to build the trust that is such a vital part of our ecumenical journey. It is love that will reject any distorted kind of unity that overcomes, overpowers, or coerces the other, and neither will it settle for a weak type of encounter that is merely formal. This love goes beyond every level of restriction and restraint; it is not abstract, sentimental, soft, or romantic, but is embodied and whole, witnessed in the visible and the practical, in the passionate and the truly challenging, able to address the deepest evil and injustice. We have learned from one another that love which in private is tenderness in public is justice.

21. This truest and deepest love then also enables a genuine and critical accountability. Admonition and challenge, “speaking the truth in love,” as much as gentle kindness, will also be part of growing communion. Love embraces our whole being to unify mind, body, and soul in igniting true affection and in actively resisting evil together for the sake of justice. It includes working together for the transformation of the world. It goes as far as the challenge and the command to love not only our friends but even our enemies. This kind of love, seen in Christ and known among us as *we are in Christ*, receiving him and believing in him as the only Son of God (John 1:12; 3:18), can reshape both our relationships with each other and our witness to the wider world.

### **Our witness to the world**

22. An ecumenism of the heart springs from an experience of the love of Christ stirring in us the *metanoia* that purifies our hearts, minds, and wills so that we are able truly to embrace one another. This love can also make us witnesses to love in the world. The churches, the nations, the communities of our world today, and the whole of creation are groaning and crying out in pain, and it is the very love of God working within us that opens our ears and hearts to their cries. We have been walking together on the way towards visible unity, and we have learned, even on our bumpy pilgrimage, that only the love of God can get us moving together to enter faithfully into God’s new future. Churches committed to growing in communion with one another, to true love for one another across even profound differences, will live in ways that are deeply counter-cultural in today’s world.

23. Let us pray that we will never seek to divide or conquer, to exploit or humiliate, to overwhelm by violence or enforce unity; nor to collude any more with the inequalities of the world. Let us not be tempted by politics that is shaped by deepened individualism, dangerous nationalism or increasing militarism; or accept as inevitable the systemic inequalities that divide the world; or suffer without resistance the dominance and dangers of consumerism and of those technologies that alienate us from one another or that damage our God-given humanity. Out of love, we commit ourselves to build a world for the common good, for all humankind. We long for the kind of communion that celebrates and affirms the dignity of all people and honours the whole living earth as the work of God the Creator. Together in Christ, formed in Christ’s image, walking the way of love, and in repentance, we celebrate unity as both gift and virtue, knowing that we are called to bear witness to communion in a world that too often creates and exacerbates division. In a world

of separation, inequality and injustice, Christ calls his followers to witness to the unifying power of the love that is a gift of the Spirit. This provokes a strong challenge in the world and sounds a call to an alternative order, one moving towards unity and reconciliation of all humankind and of the whole creation.

### **Christ's love on the pilgrim way: a call to loving discipleship**

24. We have gathered, as a fellowship of churches, as pilgrims on Christ's way, confessing our faith, receiving and sharing hospitality with sisters and brothers siblings in Christ. We journey together energized by Christ's love, offering glory to God, sharing our stories, our laments, our cries for justice, our dances of joy, nourishing our faith, and giving one another hope. The practice of love that turns a stranger into a neighbour and a neighbour into a sister or brother calls us to make space for one another, to be patient, kind, humble, generous, and truthful with one another. We will make reconciliation and unity practices of unconditional love and marks of the ecumenical movement. In this journey, we remember before our God and Father the work produced by faith, the labour prompted by love, and the endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1:3).

25. In faithfulness to the decades of the life of the World Council of Churches, we call one another now not only to stay together and to move together but, most of all, to love one another, as Christ himself commanded his disciples (John 13:34). The fellowship of churches in the WCC is invited to pray together to the God whose love, revealed in Christ, transforms us. We call one another to proclaim together the faith we share that God's love, in Christ, will indeed move our churches towards visible unity. We commit ourselves to strengthen each other in a transforming discipleship.

### **For the future**

26. We affirm the vision of the WCC for the visible unity of all Christians, and we invite other Christians to share this vision with us. We also invite all people of faith and goodwill to trust, with us, that a different world, a world respectful of the living earth, a world in which everyone has daily bread and life in abundance, a decolonized world, a more loving, harmonious, just, and peaceful world, is possible. In a world weighed down with so much pain, anguish, and fear, we believe that the love we have seen in Christ brings the liberating possibilities of joy, justice for all, and peace with the earth. Moved by the Holy Spirit, compelled by a vision of unity, we journey on together, resolved to practise Christ's love, following his steps as his disciples, and carrying a torch for love in the world, trusting in the promise that Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.

### **A prayer**

Holy God, source and creator of all things, eternal  
love, we give thanks to you:  
Father, who loves us infinitely,  
Son who reveals to us unconditional love,  
Holy Spirit who empowers us with divine love,  
gather us together in your love, that we may  
grow in visible communion and so witness to  
unity in the world.  
Where your people are broken, may love mend.  
When hatred shouts in the world, let love bring peace with justice.  
As creation groans, may redemption come to all the earth.  
Come with your divine love, and enter our hearts.  
Move your church, and move the world to  
reconciliation and unity. Amen.

