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A worldwide fellowship of churches seeking unity, a common witness and Christian service

In Trondheim, Central Committee forges decisions around Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace

30 June 2016

Hope in a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace formed the integral thread for proceedings at the meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Trondheim, Norway this week.

The 2016 meeting took place 22-28 June, the second gathering since the Central Committee was elected at the WCC 10th Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea in 2013.

The theme, "Pilgrimage: Discerning the Landscapes Together," reflected the final message of the 10th Assembly prompting, among others, a powerful statement for peace and justice in Israel and Palestine.

At the invitation of the Church of Norway, the Central Committee talked about the key issues for the world ecumenical family, in Trondheim, an important Christian pilgrimage site, home to the northernmost medieval cathedral in the world.

The meeting of Central Committee, the WCC's main governing body until the next assembly, was called to order by its moderator, Dr Agnes Abuom, from the Anglican Church of Kenya, on 22 June, who urged member churches to be catalysts for change in "a rapidly changing and increasingly pluralistic world".



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Possibilities from pilgrimage

Abuom observed that "the pilgrimage offers us immense possibilities to re-imagine ourselves as a movement of God's people in the mission – open and inclusive, and agile and receptive to the promptings of the Spirit."

Meeting every two years, the Central Committee has 150 representatives elected from the 348 WCC member churches. It is responsible for carrying out the policies adopted by the assembly, reviewing and supervising WCC programmes and the budget.

The election of new Executive Committee members also took place in Trondheim. In addition, the Central Committee elected a committee to perform a midterm evaluation of its programmes and another to plan the next WCC assembly.

"We have affirmed time and again that the church is a people's movement and that the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace will also engage people of other faiths and men and women of good will," Abuom said. "Let us reclaim and rebuild our capacity for discourse."

WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, a member of the Church of Norway, described the church on pilgrimage as "a people defined by hope".

He said, "This is not about generalized optimism, but instead about conveying a reason and motivation for hope.

"Often it means being able to see beyond what we see and expecting something more and something else, looking for justice and peace, and nothing less," explained Tveit. "Hope is a criterion of our Christian faith."

He cited examples mentioned in the Executive Committee's review of activities since 2014 with the WCC's involvement in stages of the pilgrimage such as in the Korean peninsula, Ukraine, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine, South Sudan, Burundi, Colombia, Nigeria and in cities of the United States that have experienced racial confrontation.

‘Peace and justice in Israel and Palestine’

In Trondheim the Central Committee authorized the convening of an international ecumenical conference in 2017 “to reaffirm and strengthen ecumenical witness for peace with justice for Israelis and Palestinians.”

It also delivered a key statement on the historic bilateral ceasefire agreement concluded by the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) in Havana on 23 June 2016.

“Truth, healing and transformation” are key themes of a statement from an Indigenous Peoples’ Conference and the WCC also declared the churches’ solidarity with Tanah Papua (West Papua).

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’s 23 June referendum decision to leave the European Union was followed by a Central Committee statement inviting member churches “to pray for God’s guidance and wisdom for religious, political leaders in the UK, in Europe and around the world”.

Panel discussions were held on child rights and there was critical introspection on religion and violence, while the WCC also spoke up on behalf of forcibly displaced persons, including the right to asylum.

‘Network of peace initiatives’

“We have established a network of peace initiatives,” Tveit reported, noting a previous week’s gathering of church participants “for a workshop in Johannesburg, South Africa, commemorating 40 years since the Soweto massacre. The churches share with one another, from different parts of the world, how we are fulfilling our role of being peacemakers and calling for justice.”

Encouragement, inspiration and storytelling animated a plenary discussion of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, the session first highlighting the most visible initiatives of the pilgrimage since its inception in late 2013.

It included the highly successful climate pilgrimage to the UN-sponsored Paris conference in late 2015 that resulted in a landmark treaty on climate-change curbs; several recent initiatives and visits with member churches in the Middle East; the 2015 pilgrimage through Latin America by WCC Latin American president Rev. Gloria Nohemy Ulloa Alvarado and the general secretary; and the pilgrimage to Hiroshima and Nagasaki by a member church delegation for the observance of the 70th anniversary of the dropping of the atom bombs and commemorations of the victims there.

World Mission Conference

On 29 June the Central Committee chose Arusha, Tanzania as the venue for the next World Mission Conference to be held 8-13 March 2018.

Bishop Geevarghese Mor Coorilos, Moderator of the WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), presented the conference theme, “Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship.”

More than 700 delegates from churches worldwide are expected to gather for the event hosted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania.

During the meeting, the WCC welcomed three new member churches to the ecumenical fellowship and also admitted two others to interim membership status.

Dutch Reformed Church

South Africa’s Dutch Reformed Church, founded in the 17th century, with more than a million members and three theological faculties had been suspended from the WCC in 1962 due to its involvement in and support of apartheid.

In 1986 the DRC rejected all forms of racism and opened its membership to all believers.

Another new member is the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) for the southern region of Malawi. Established by Scottish missionaries in the 19th century, the CCAP Blantyre Synod includes 1.8 million members in 800 local congregations.

The Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI) joined the WCC, one of the largest Baptist groups in India, including 1.2 million members in 7263 congregations.

The Africa Brotherhood Church, from Kenya and the Community of Baptist Churches in Central Africa (CBCA) from the Democratic Republic of Congo entered into interim WCC membership.

The group of 150 representatives from WCC member churches reviewed the WCC programme planning for 2018-2021 and the budget including financial scenarios. During the weekend they visited congregations in the Trondheim area. The Central Committee was welcomed to Trondheim by leaders of Norwegian churches and local government.

“This meeting is a symbol of what we need more of: more dialogue and fellowship across borders,” says Norway’s minister of culture, Linda Hofstad Helleland. “Then we will be able to create change and movement.” Helleland was speaking in Trondheim, where she addressed delegates of the Central Committee meeting.

She continued: “It feels special to be here together with religious leaders from all over the world, who are united through their belief and their ongoing battle for values like peace and justice. This gives us opportunities and hopes for the future. That is why I find this meeting so important to attend.”

In her address to the delegates, Helleland stressed that the work of religious leaders cannot be valued high enough.

WCC Central Committee

WCC news release 28 June, 2016: New Executive Committee members elected in Trondheim

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