

Christ's Love moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity

Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian Church

Sunday 18th September 2022

Right Rev Hamish Galloway

Text: John 17:20-23

Micah 4:1-5

Introduction

On Tuesday 30th August I arrived at Frankfurt airport on my way to the World Council of Churches' 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe. As I made my way to the train, I encountered an older African man struggling on the stairs with a big suitcase. As I helped him with his suitcase we started to talk and discovered we were both going to the Assembly! "How old are you?" he asked, then, proud, told me he was 81! I discovered his name, Silas, and that he was from the Presbyterian Church of Malawi, which was started in 1835 by none other than David Livingstone! Thus began a 10-day conference with 4,500 people from all over the world – where we sat, we had people from Korea and Taiwan in front, from Korea and Zimbabwe beside, Liberia and Cameroon behind us, and some impressively dressed Orthodox priest from Eritrea just across the aisle. The first day we made friends over meal times with folk from Albania, Wales and Lebanon.... the list goes on and on. But not just that, there was the sheer diversity of denominations, from Orthodox to Reformed (that's us), Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal.... this list goes on as well! We all gathered around the theme "*God's love moves us towards reconciliation and unity!*" We all gathered around the logo of a cross, a green circle, a dove and two winding lines.



Christ's love
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World Council of Churches
11th Assembly
Karlsruhe, Germany
31 August – 8 September, 2022



The cross clearly symbolises Jesus, Son of God, dying for forgiveness and reconciliation and rising in victory; the dove, the Holy Spirit; the green circle, on the one hand a circular image for the infinite creator God, on the other symbolising the earth in this time of climate crisis. The winding lines? One is the river Rhine flowing not far from where we met, but also the biblical image of living water, the other line a pathway – together representing the idea of moving together, of journeying on a pilgrimage from polarization and division towards the vision of reconciliation and unity so aptly captured in our readings today from John 17 and Micah 4. It is a unity found in the trinity of the logo which inspires us in turn to replicate that on earth!

Many speakers at the Assembly addressed this vision. One quoted Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who said: *“After the flood, God taught Noah and through him all humanity, that we should think not of ourselves but of the human other as in the image of God. That is the only way to save ourselves from violence and self-destruction. This really is a life changing idea. It means that the greatest religious challenge is: can I see God’s image in one who is not in my image – whose culture, class, colour, or creed is different from mine?”*

And another speaker quoted the famous German theologian Hans Kung (who lived not far from Karlsruhe and died only last year) when he said that there will be no peace between nations without peace between religions and there will be no peace between religions without dialogue.

This WCC event certainly committed to providing a safe and healthy space for dialogue between incredibly diverse Christian expressions, but also, in the presence of Jewish, Muslim and Mormon religious leaders, dialogue between religions.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said in his speech, this is a time of world crisis on numerous fronts that don’t need division: *“the time for living separately has passed.”*

1. A Miracle

The leaders of the WCC spoke of a miracle in that we were able to gather so many from all around the world in this time of Covid. But I think there was a deeper miracle going on. It was a miracle of a common desire for unity in our increasingly polarized world. The World Council of Churches began in 1948, just after the second world war. They invited the German churches to be part of it – our German hosts in Karlsruhe spoke repeatedly of how much that meant to the German church as they sought to rebuild after the horrors of WWII. This was particularly poignant where we were in Karlsruhe – the beautiful palace was bombed in the war, but is now beautifully restored and was the centre-piece of an amazing light show each night we were there – a symbol of rebuilding after the destruction of conflict and war! And this WCC since 1948 has continued to work for justice, reconciliation, unity and peace ever since.

The newly elected General Secretary Rev Dr Prof Jerry Pillay put it this way:
“A divided church is a feeble witness to an already fragmented and broken world.”

On the contrary, Jesus put it this way:
“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

And the prophet Micah stated in a vision of *“Every person sitting under their own vine, their own fig tree, and no-one will make them afraid.”*

And so, in a polarized world, this huge, diverse gathering around reconciliation and unity was a miracle *and* a message to the world of the unifying power of Christ’s love!

2. Challenges to reconciliation and unity

This journey is fraught. There are huge challenges in getting a group like this together! For example, there is a tension between maintaining unity and speaking up for justice. On the first day, the German President, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, spoke out strongly against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. When he finished, the large Russian Orthodox contingent rose together and filed out! They threatened to leave the meeting but, after dialogue with the WCC leaders, agreed to stay so long as they could make a published statement! Interesting beginning to an Assembly that was preparing to make a statement on Ukraine!

When it came to the to debating the draft statement on Ukraine and Russia, the leader of the Russian Orthodox spoke. He likened the statement condemning the Russian invasion as being as

superficial as McDonalds or Starbucks, because it was shallow, no taking into account the complexities that led Russia into this situation! The leadership received this with grace and an assurance that they were being heard – clearly an attempt to keep them in the room! However, one black South African woman in the small group I was in exclaimed:

How much justice must we sacrifice on the altar of unity?

That led the group around us to email our feedback in these terms: the war in Ukraine is an unprovoked, violent and unjustifiable aggressive act, and the WCC statement must not be watered down.”

That voice was heard; the statement stood!

Another challenge is the enormity of the problems in the world today and the need to move from talk to action.

One African bishop appealed to the Assembly to move to action that addresses the source of the problem by talking about ‘scratch where it itches’. That resonated with me. I thought of those annoying itches in places we can’t reach! So many big world problems seem like this.

Another African, Lydia Neshangwe from Zimbabwe, an impressive woman who is Moderator of the Council for World Mission, put it this way:

“In Africa we have a saying, a parable. In Egypt people were placing unwanted babies in the River Nile! That river runs down through Africa. In the nations half-way down, the people were rescuing babies, resuscitating babies, rehabilitating babies in the nations in the lower reaches, people were taking dead babies out of the river and giving them a decent burial! But the moral of the story rests in addressing the problems at the top of the Nile, finding out why the babies got there in the first place and solving that! Scratching the real itch!”

Over the course of the Assembly, whether at the main gathering, in small group gatherings, or in one-on-one conversations over coffee or a meal, we heard desperate stories of need, brokenness, violence and crisis!

Obviously, the Ukraine, where one Ukrainian delegate for example addressed the Russian Orthodox with the words *“How can you compare the blood of our people to McDonalds and Starbucks?”*

And a Russian Orthodox spoke quietly to me about his priest, who had been sentenced to 15 years in prison for speaking up for the war.

Some African delegates spoke of acts of terrorism against Christians, and others of the challenge of preaching hope to people caught up in severe poverty.

South Koreans made a passionate plea for reunification, and we heard heart-breaking stories about the Palestinian/Israeli situation, and then there was Syria, Myanmar, West Papua....

But the biggest, most strident voices were the youth delegates around climate – don’t call it climate change, it is climate crisis, it is climate catastrophe, they told us in elevated, anxious and pleading voices. “Our world is on fire”; “you are leaving us a terrible mess to clean up.” And so we spent significant time grappling with this biblically, theologically, in terms of justice and calls for action!

These are the huge challenges that threaten us and make the idea of united Christian action so imperative! At one point another famous German theologian, Karl Barth, was quoted:

“Christian unity is the antidote to a divided and polarized world.”

This is truer and more urgent today than ever!

Conclusion

As part of the Assembly, small groups of delegates were hosted on the weekend by local churches. Anne and I were beautifully hosted by the Evangelical Community Church in the Black Forest town of Guggenau. They took us biking and walking in the Black Forest, stopping in villages to look at historic churches. At the Sunday service the preacher, Alexander Kunick, reflected on the way this Assembly brought people together in powerful, world changing unity:

“We are one in Christ. The love of Christ moves, reconciles, and unites the world, that is the motto of the Assembly in Karlsruhe. This goes beyond the Church. The whole world is involved, drawn into the love of Christ. A dream. We can give this dream a face on the ground, today.

We celebrate this day today as a celebration of encounter. We meet not so much as hosts and guests, but as friends, as sisters and brothers in the one Lord Jesus Christ. Even if one or the other is foreign and remains foreign, our hearts speak. And they express friendship, and affection and love. We are all fellow citizens of the saints and God’s housemates, united by Christ. This is a foretaste of heaven. Amen.”