



Unity Statement

Recommended action: That the central committee discuss the draft unity statement; affirm the direction of the work; encourage consultation with members of commissions and consultative bodies on the draft; and ask the executive committee to submit, on behalf of the central committee, the draft to the assembly for approval.

GOD'S CREATION AND OUR UNITY

The whole of creation is a gift from God. It is the will of God that the whole creation, things in heaven and things on earth, should be brought to ultimate unity and communion in Christ and with Christ (Eph 1:10). We celebrate creation's life and diversity and give thanks for its goodness (Gen. 1).

Our Experience

The world and its people live in the tension between the profoundest hope and the deepest despair. We give thanks for the diversity of human cultures, for the wonder of knowledge and discovery, for communities being rebuilt and enemies reconciled, for people being healed and populations fed. These are signs of hope, peace and new beginnings. But we grieve that there are also places where God's children cry out. Social and economic injustice, poverty and famine have ravaged our world. There is violence and terrorism, the threat of nuclear war and of all wars. Many suffer from AIDS and other epidemics, peoples are displaced and their lands are dispossessed. We are all in danger of being disconnected from earth and alienated from our cultures. Creation has been misused and we all face threats to the balance of life, a growing ecological crisis and the effects of climate change. These are signs of disordered relations with God and creation, and we confess that they dishonour the gift of life.

Within the churches, we experience the same tension between celebration and sorrow. There are signs of vibrant life and creative energy in the growth of Christian communities around the world with a new and unprecedented diversity. There is a deepening sense among churches of needing one another and of being called by Christ to be in unity. But there are also painful experiences of situations where diversity has turned into division, and we do not always recognise the face of Christ in each other. Too easily we withdraw into our own traditions. For some, the creative new life of faith seems not to embrace the yearning for unity or the longing of fellowship with others. We all may be held back as some grow weary or disappointed on the ecumenical path.

Although we gratefully receive the holy gifts of God, yet, as those with human failings, we do not always honour the God who is the source of our life. Our abuse of life, our refusal to pursue justice, our unwillingness to live in peace and our practices of exclusion, exploitation and marginalisation mean that we, as Christians, have not yet fully received together the gifts of God's life. Increasingly, we recognize that we are called to share with, and learn from, those of other faiths, to work with them in common efforts for justice and peace and for the preservation of the integrity of God's beautiful but hurting creation. These deepening relations and opportunities for shared service bring delights, new challenges and enlarge our understanding.

Our shared scriptural vision

Through the reading of the Scriptures together our eyes are opened to the place of the community of God's people, the Church, within creation. As men and women created in the image and likeness of God, given the responsibility for the stewardship of life, we wait with eager longing for God to renew the whole creation (Rom 8: 22). God's people are called to work for justice and peace, to care for the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, to be a light to the nations. God sent Jesus Christ who through his death on the Cross destroyed the walls of separation and hostility, and brought about genuine unity and reconciliation in his own body (Eph 2: 14-16). By his dying and by his resurrection and through the power of the Holy Spirit, a new way of living in communion with God and the new way of communion with one another in the life and love of God was opened to us (1 John 1.1-3).

Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples for the sake of the world and preached the coming of God's kingdom now and still to come (John 17:21). He entrusted this message and ministry of unity and reconciliation to his disciples and through them to the Church that is called to continue his mission (2 Cor 5: 18-20). From the beginning the community of the baptized lived together, were devoted to the apostolic teaching and fellowship, breaking bread and praying together, caring for the needy and yet struggling with factions and divisions (Acts 2. 34).

The Church as a Body of Christ embodies Jesus' uniting, reconciling and self-sacrificial love on the cross. At the heart of God's own life of communion is forever a Cross and forever resurrection – a reality which is revealed to us and through us. God is always there ahead of us, always surprising us, transcending our failures and offering us the gift of new life.

What we have learned on our journey together

Christian unity, the unity of the human community and the unity of the whole creation belong together. In God's plan they are inseparable. The Church is: foretaste of new creation; called to be sign to the whole world of the life God intends for all; and instrument spreading the good news of God's kingdom of justice, peace and love.

As **foretaste** God gives to the Church gracious gifts: a faith; baptism in which we are in Christ and made a new creation; the Eucharist, the foretaste of the heavenly Banquet; a ministry to nurture the gifts of all the baptised. Ordered life too is gift helping us to live sacrificially, in justice and peace, and serving one another and the world. We are coming to understand that diversity is also a gift. It is creative and life-giving, yet it cannot be so great that the baptised become strangers and enemies to one another.¹

As prophetic **sign** the Church's vocation is to show forth the life God wills for the whole creation. We are hardly a credible sign as long as our ecclesial divisions and hostilities remain. Divisions and marginalisation on the basis of ethnicity, gender, power, status, caste also obscure the Church's witness to unity. To be a credible sign our life together must reflect the qualities of patience, generosity, attentive listening to one another, mutual accountability, inclusivity, a willingness to stay together, not saying 'I have no need of you' (1 Cor 12:21). Only as Christians are renewed and inspired by God's Spirit will the Church bear authentic witness to the possibility of reconciled life for all people, for all creation. It is especially in its weakness and poverty, suffering as Christ suffers, that the Church is credible sign and mystery of God's grace.²

As **instrument** the Church is called to make present God's holy and life affirming plan for the world revealed in Jesus Christ. In its work of service, evangelism and mission done in Christ's way, the Church participates in offering God's life to the world. We are to challenge structures of injustice, work to

¹ We pray that as our churches respond to the Faith and Order document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, we may be helped to understand more of the visible unity God calls us to live in and for the world.

² We gratefully acknowledge the many programmes of the WCC that have helped us to understand what it means to be a faithful community where divisions of ethnicity, gender, power and status are being confronted and overcome.

overcome violence and promote peace. As we have stood together in situations of oppression, acted together to overcome violence and worked for just peace, we have understood more of Christ's ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us.³

God's call to our generation

In our fellowship of churches, we have learned that we are called to pray, to witness and to work together for the visible unity of the Church, the unity of the human community and the unity of all creation. Our hearts are open to receive God's gift of unity and we long to make that visible in the world. Despite our human failings, we are never dismayed, but continually rejoice that the God of life goes on creating what is good. Having faith in God's creating and recreating power, we trust that the Church will indeed be foretaste, prophetic sign and effective instrument of the new life that God offers to the world. For it is in God, who beckons us to life in all its fullness and promise, that we find the source of our joy and the ground of our hopes for unity. Because of this, we pray, as Christ prayed, that we shall be one, for the sake of the world.

We ask one another:

Will we witness together to the God of life, that the whole creation may be sustained, honoured and renewed?

Will we work together for justice, peace and reconciliation?

Will we continue together, seeking the visible unity of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, determined, wherever possible, to live that unity now?

Will we pray together that the God of life, will lead us to justice and peace; in the Church, among all people, and in and for the whole created earth?

Through these things we will stay together, committed to "the primary purpose of the fellowship of churches...to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe."⁴ We turn to God on whom we depend, to keep ever before us the pattern of faithfulness that is our discipleship in Christ.

O God of life,
lead us to justice and peace,
that the scarred world may find healing,
divided churches become visibly one
and suffering people find hope,
through the one who prayed for us
and in whom we are one body,
your Son, Jesus Christ,
who with you and the Holy Spirit,
lives and reigns, one God,
now and forever, Amen.

³ We are thankful for all we have learned through the Decade to Overcome Violence about peace in God's way; and all we have learned about mission in God's way as we commemorated Edinburgh 1910 and have encapsulated in the CWME document, *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*.

⁴ *The Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches* as amended by the 9th Assembly, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2006; III: Purposes and Functions.