

Kairos for Creation – Confessing Hope for the Earth

The Wuppertal Call

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” – 2 Chron. 7:14.

“If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” – 2 Cor. 5:17-18

Preamble

From 16 to 19 June 2019, 52 participants from 22 countries and from different confessional and faith traditions gathered in Wuppertal, Germany for a conference entitled “Together towards eco-theologies, ethics of sustainability and eco-friendly churches”.¹ In Wuppertal we were reminded of the courageous confession of faith articulated in the Barmen Declaration (1934) against the totalitarian, inhuman and racist ideology of the time. Barmen continues to encourage us today for “a joyful liberation from the godless ties of this world for free grateful service to his creatures” (Barmen 2).

We shared stories from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America, and Oceania. We heard the cries of the earth, the cries of people vulnerable to the effects of climate change, especially children and the elderly, the cries of youth demanding intergenerational justice and the concerns of experts over current trends.

We recognize the urgency of the years that lie ahead, nevertheless express the courage to hope and are compelled to call the global ecumenical movement towards a comprehensive ecological transformation of society.

Kairos: A decisive turn in the pilgrimage of justice and peace

The ecumenical movement has long committed itself to a pilgrimage towards justice, peace and the integrity of creation. These goals will require urgent steps on the road ahead. The urgency of the crisis calls us to read the signs of the time, to hear God’s call, to follow the way of Christ, to discern the movement of the Spirit and, in response, to recognize the positive initiatives of churches all around the world.

The symptoms of the crisis touch on all the building blocks of life and are there for all to see:

- Fresh water is contaminated; glaciers are melting; oceans are polluted with plastics and are becoming acidic so that corals reefs are bleached (water).
- Land is degraded through unsustainable agriculture and unhealthy eating habits, extractive economies ruled by global financial powers, deforestation, desertification and soil erosion; animals are groaning and creatures are being genetically modified; fish populations are depleted; habitat loss leads to the unprecedented loss of biodiversity (earth). Both the land and the health of people are being poisoned by industrial, agricultural, municipal and nuclear forms of waste and by pesticides and chemicals. An increasing number of people is forced to migrate and to become climate refugees.
- Global carbon emissions are still increasing, greenhouse gases are accumulating in the atmosphere and climates are disrupted (air).
- It is the still increasing use of energy from fossil fuels that is driving such changes (fire).

The delicate systems of balances in creation has been disturbed to an unprecedented extent in the Anthropocene. We have transgressed planetary boundaries. The earth seems no longer able to heal itself. Creatures are groaning in travail (Rom. 8:22). We have been unable to hold together ecumenical concerns over justice amid poverty, unemployment and inequality, over

¹ The conference was planned and organized together by Protestant Association of Churches and Mission (EMW), Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), United Evangelical Mission (UEM), Bread for the World, World Council of Churches

a participatory society amid various forms of violent conflict and over sustainability amid ecological destruction.

Although humans have not contributed equally to the root causes of this crisis, as Christians we come together to confess our complicity and bondage to sin:

- We have been arrogant in assuming that the whole earth centres around us humans and our needs (pride).
- We have become trapped in an abysmal desire for unlimited material growth, driven by a pervasive culture of consumerism (greed).
- We have exploited God's gifts, resorted to violence against God's creatures and violated human dignity (violence).
- We have become alienated from ancestral land and indigenous wisdom, from animals as our co-creatures and from Earth as our God-given home (the privation of the good).
- We have been overcome by folly, injustice, denial and greed (vice).
- We have been slow in coming to terms with our responsibility to address the defining crisis of our age (sloth).

To make matters worse, the authenticity of ecumenical witness is being undermined by a range of distortions of the gospel, toxic narratives and theologies that legitimize a totalitarian logic of death and destruction. These include theologies of dominion in the name of differences of race, gender, class and species, the theological legitimation of patriarchal domination; dualist and reductionist ways of relating heaven and earth, soul and body, spirit and matter; the denial and ridicule of scientific expertise and insights in order to maintain the current order, the prolonging of myths of unlimited progress, putting trust only in technological solutions to ecological problems instead of realizing their cultural, moral and spiritual nature; the pseudo-gospel of emphasizing the accumulation of wealth and prosperity, self-serving ways of always blaming problems on others; and escapist ways of addressing the victims of ecological injustice.

Hope: Courage in an age of anxiety and despair

Amidst the unprecedented despair associated with an overwhelming ecological crisis, we proclaim a hope in the Triune God in the midst of a groaning creation, "for in this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:24). God has not abandoned the earth. We hold onto God's promises symbolized in the covenant that is made "with every living creature, for all future generations" (Gen. 9:12). We believe in God's presence as revealed in Jesus the Christ amidst the mess around us. We are comforted by the power of the Spirit to "renew the face of the earth" (Ps. 104:30).

In the face of economic and political narratives that distort our understanding of proper relationships between humans, creation and Creator, such hope may seem counter-intuitive. The hope that we proclaim not only critiques oppressive and patriarchal systems of dominion but inspires us to participate in the healing of creation (2 Chron. 7:14). Hope is not the same as blind optimism that trusts in the mere extension of current trends. Such hope is not cheap; it is costly. It springs forth despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary because it rests in the Triune God. It is such hope that encourages us and compels us towards a comprehensive ecological transformation of society.

A call to the global ecumenical movement

At the heart of the required transformation is a need for ecological conversion (*metanoia*), a change of heart, mind, attitudes, daily habits and forms of praxis (Rom. 12:1-2). This has implications for all aspects of Christian life: for liturgy and worship, reading the Bible, proclamation, the sacraments, congregational fellowship and practices, prayer, fasting, spirituality, doctrine, ethos, education, art, music, ministries and missions. This ecological reformation of all of Christianity has been encouraged by our fathers and mothers in the Christian tradition, by the examples of our sisters and brothers around the world and by ecumenical leaders such as Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Pope Francis, Archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu and many other voices.

We call upon the global ecumenical movement, Christian world communions and all other churches to plan for a *decade of ecological learning, confessing and comprehensive action to re-orient the priorities of churches to the following commitments:*

1. To renew the full range of liturgical and spiritual practices and ancient church traditions on creation in the light of the current kairos;
2. To reread the biblical texts and study them with ecological sensitivities;
3. To create frameworks for nurturing eco-congregations, providing them with the necessary staff and financial resources and supporting existing grassroots initiatives;
4. To promote gender justice in church and society given its multiple connections with ecological concerns;
5. To encourage youth to exercise leadership in church and society for the sake of a future that is theirs;
6. To mainstream eco-theological reflection across all levels of education;
7. To cultivate ecological virtues and nurture sustainable lifestyles in households and communities;
8. To equip the laity for their vocations in order to exercise ecological responsibility wherever they live, work and worship.
9. To engage in multi-disciplinary dialogue that can hold together and do justice to insights from the sciences, indigenous wisdom traditions and diverse theologies;
10. To advocate inter-disciplinary alliances, networks and partnerships with all levels of government, with business and industry, with civil society, with multifaith ecological networks, with other living faiths, and with all people who share a commitment to find sustainable alternatives to dominant forms of production and consumption.

In view of the forthcoming 11th assembly of the World Council of Churches in 2021 we recommend to the WCC, in particular, that it declares a “Decade for the Healing of Creation” with the following goals:

- To mobilize member churches to re-orient their priorities to the commitments as indicated in the Wuppertal Call;
- To engage with the UN’s agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through various alliances, networks and partnerships and to go beyond the SDG-agenda in order to redefine notions of growth, wealth and well-being which are not sufficiently clarified yet with regard to the existing planetary boundaries.
- To advocate to global decision makers that the increase in global greenhouse emissions should be halted and drastically reduced as soon as possible in order to reach net-zero carbon emissions and to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius.
- To promote UN processes to create a legal framework for a binding “Universal Charter of the Rights of Mother Earth” (Cochabamba 2010), an Earth international jurisprudence system, and explore the possibilities of a UN Council for the Rights of Nature and to explore recognition of ecocide as a criminal offence in the International Court of Justice.

These commitments follow from an understanding of the Kairos moment in history in which we find ourselves. The task ahead is immense and will require decades of dedication. The urgency of the situation implies that a comprehensive response cannot be delayed. The next decade will be decisive to allow the Earth a time of rest. The biblical motifs of Sabbath and Jubilee provide a unique source of hope and inspiration, an interruption in the cycle of exploitation and violence, expressed in the vision that there shall be “a year of complete rest for the land” (Lev. 25:5).

Come Holy Spirit, renew your whole creation!

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