

PREAMBLE

Witnessing to Peace in a Violent World

8. At the end of the Decade to Overcome Violence, we find ourselves at a special moment, a *kairos* of grace. We wish to take stock at this time to reflect upon where this journey of struggling to overcome violence and to enable the churches to contribute to genuine cultures of peace has come: how the events in history have spoken to us, and how we as churches have worked to respond to them.

Events of History: Calling Us to Build Peace

9. God speaks to humanity in diverse ways (cf. Heb 1:1). The Word of God has come to us through the Scriptures and within the churches. But God also speaks to us in the events of history, bidding us to repent of our sinfulness and seeking a deeper conversion to Christ. We believe that events in the past two decades have been such a call to renew our commitment to the *shalom* of God for which so many people in our time cry out.

- With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the end of the Cold War between East and West that followed, it seemed as though a new era of peace and understanding might be upon us. At the same time, it reminded us of the damage to human beings and to society that forty years of repression and of threatened nuclear confrontation had wreaked upon the human family. The euphoria was soon replaced by an upsurge of intra-state violence in Europe, Africa, and Asia.
- The 1992 Year of Indigenous Peoples, declared by the United Nations, brought forward the plight of indigenous peoples, especially in Australia, New Zealand and the Americas. The deep wounds of half a millennium of colonialism and even genocide were impressed upon the consciousness of the world.
- Also in 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development sent a worldwide signal in its concluding Declaration about the growing ecological crisis and the consequences of climate change for the planet. Thus began the mobilization of national governments to look seriously at carbon emissions and other factors of human origin damaging the environment irreparably.
- The Beijing Conference in the 1994 UN Year of the Woman brought to world attention the pervasive violence against women and children, both domestic violence and international trafficking and abuse in the workplace.
- 1994 was also the year when apartheid ended as the national policy of South Africa. On the one hand, it showed the triumph of non-violent action over a violent regime. On the other, it impressed upon South Africans and indeed the world the challenges of building a new and just society.
- The genocide in Rwanda that same year showed how a few weeks of murderous frenzy could wipe out decades of development work, calling into question the policies of relief and development agencies, both religious and secular.
- By the turn of the twenty-first century, the negative outcomes of globalization became ever more evident in the disruption of families by migration, the effects of economic dislocation, the globalization of crime and the glorification of violence in the media.

The Churches Respond: The Decade to Overcome Violence

10. All of these events pressed home the insight that peace and human well-being do not just happen: they require the grace of God and human cooperation with that divine gift. To be sure the Churches were already more than aware of the consequences of some of these events. Already in 1975 at the World Council of Churches' General Assembly in Nairobi, the issue of sustainability in view of environmental degradation had been sounded; the commitment to a "Conciliar Process of Mutual Commitment (Covenant) for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" was made already in 1983, long before the theme came to the wider attention of the rest of the world. The Vancouver commitment led to the Seoul Convocation in 1990 which formulated key affirmations and suggestions. In the 1990s, gatherings of churches and of church people at local and regional levels

were exploring a wide range of themes around peace, peacemaking, and reconciliation. The notion of “just peace,” going beyond the “just war” concept long associated with Christianity, became a guiding concept in many churches.

11. A significant step was made at the eighth assembly of the WCC in Harare in 1998, when delegates voted to establish The Decade to Overcome Violence. A Reference Group was assembled to guide the process, although all programme units of the WCC were involved. This led to a variety of activities in different parts of the world. The different manifestations of violence came into focus. Special attention was given to peace in families, in the marketplace and workplace, in the social and political sphere, in the virtual world, and with creation itself. Consultations were held about aspects of peacemaking, such as forgiveness, the healing of memories, the responsibility to protect, peace with creation, and others. Delegates at the ninth assembly in Porto Alegre in 2006 voted to conclude the Decade in 2011 with an International Ecumenical Peace Convocation. They also decided that an Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace be elaborated and brought to the 2011 Convocation for discussion and action..

12. It is that moment in time we are now approaching. We believe it to be a *kairos* moment. It is a *kairos* moment because we see the world in which we live reaching a critical moment. Movements and forces that have threatened the further existence of our world from our immediate past are still very much with us, such as nuclear arms and the yawning gap between rich and poor. The emerging world food crisis and the acceleration of environmental degradation must now be added to that list. What makes this a critical time is the *interconnectedness* and *convergence* of all these deadly threats. The experiences and learnings of the Decade to Overcome Violence and the growing awareness of the critical convergence of destabilizing forces to our world have brought the churches to a new place as they consider how to carry out the ministry given to them by Christ to be servants and ambassadors of God's peace and reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-20). Just Peace, for example, can no longer simply be a counterweight to Just War. What justice and what peace entail take on more comprehensive meanings in the face of all these interconnected and destabilizing forces on the one hand, and the need for an all-encompassing and seamless vision of God's peace with and for Creation on the other. The very fact that in the first decade of the twenty-first century two of the annual Nobel Peace Prizes were awarded for addressing issues of the environment is indicative of how peace and the integrity of creation are now inextricably bound up with each other. This Initial Statement is an attempt to consider how the churches need to understand peace at this *kairos* of converging and contending forces, and where discipleship calls them to commit themselves in the coming years.