



FOR INFORMATION  
EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY

**EN**  
Original

---

## **Moderator's Address**

---

### **Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm**

Dear sisters and brothers,

1. Welcome to all of you in the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva! And also a warm welcome to all the ecumenical officers, advisors, guests and media present here today in Geneva! We are meeting as a central committee in a time of trial. After the inspiring assembly in Karlsruhe we have had our first executive committee meeting in Bossey last November with getting to know each other, thankfully looking back to Karlsruhe, beginning to envision our programmatic work in the next eight years and searching for ways to ground it in a viable financial basis. In our online meeting in December before Christmas we have decided upon the budget for 2023 with painful cuts as the only way to remain on a sustainable financial path. That was hard.

2. We have now walked towards this central committee meeting with many transitions accomplished and we had a very fruitful video conference meeting on 20-26 May as well as an in-person meeting in the last two days before this meeting now.

3. Most importantly, the transitions in key positions in our Geneva staff, above all, the first months with our new general secretary Dr Jerry Pillay. I have now worked with him intensely since the beginning of this year. We have travelled together representing WCC, to the inauguration of the new Archbishop of Cyprus, to our meeting with Pope Francis in Rome and to Kiev to speak with the churches in Ukraine in preparation of a possible round table with the Russian Orthodox Church. Just ten days ago, both of us gave a common public talk at the German Protestant "Kirchentag," which is a five-day convention bringing together between 70,000 and 130,000 people celebrating our faith and engaging in serious discussions on Christian witness to this world with the president, the chancellor, the foreign minister, the minister of economics and climate policy, and many others in responsibility. Jerry and I did one of the Bible studies together, and I can tell you that your general secretary and your moderator had great fun engaging in a public dialogue on a passage from the story of Joseph and his brothers in Luke 17:20-25.

4. We enjoy working together and I can only express my deep gratitude for Jerry's work in this first half year of his term. He has done a great job. His many travels but also his internal presence and leadership in Geneva has greatly helped us making these difficult transitions.

5. The time-intensive management of transition in our internal affairs as WCC now comes together with an extremely demanding task of presence and involvement in a wounded world. This presence can never be an extra. It always must be integral part of our work as WCC if we really want to listen to Jesus' call to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

6. We face so many challenges in our world today that it's easy to become overwhelmed. We often feel as if we don't know where to start.
7. The climate emergency that is already causing so much suffering around the world, and leaves our young people wondering whether they'll have a future at all. Extreme weather events are increasing—floods, drought, storms—bringing food insecurity and natural disasters at unprecedented levels.
8. Polarization—political, social, and yes, religious—that has evaporated our ability to have meaningful dialogue or even civil discourse, and that has led to intractable violence in so many situations. Intolerance of “the other” so often inflames into violence against the other. If we cannot be unified as churches, how can we even begin to bridge the canyons carved between our countries?
9. I will not recite a litany of our global woes, but perhaps we can think of them ecumenically as layered affronts to humanity's unity, justice, and reconciliation, and as sites of our current and future ecumenical engagement in the world:
10. The most obvious symptom of our situation is violence. We think, of course, of the horrific and costly armed violence in Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, or its perennial threat to erupt in Korea and Palestine – Israel. But our world is also plagued by the daily and increasing violence in our streets and homes and by the continuing scourge of gender violence and attacks against ethnic and sexual minorities.
11. Closely related, we see the momentous disruptions and humanitarian disasters caused by such violence and by climate change. The world's over a hundred million migrants, as well as the tens of millions whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by a changing climate, leave lives completely upended, prey to hunger, poverty, disease, and exploitation.
12. At a more systemic level, we find the lack of provision for basic goods. Whether through generational poverty, rising economic inequality, unjust international financial structures, and unjust distribution of wealth.
13. Deeper yet, we find a civilization that has yet to fully recognize and address centuries of prejudice and colonial oppression through racism and sexism, as well as other assaults on human dignity and human rights by prejudice tied to disability or class or religious identity. Our ignorance, biases, and flight from understanding have left us vulnerable to misinformation, disinformation, digital distortion, and appeals from demagogic elements.
14. Fundamentally, in all this we are experiencing a crisis of values, a spiritual crisis of our civilization and a crisis of the political will to do what we know is right and just for each other and our planet.
15. As we approach the 75th anniversary of the inaugural assembly of the WCC, we need to recall that, then too, the world struggled with global catastrophe: a world that suffered 60 million dead in World War II, that left countless refugees needing housing and resettlement, that quickly divided into opposing ideological camps threatening each other with total annihilation. Then, and many times since then, the World Council of Churches through the faith, hope, and love of its member churches, ecumenical partners, and civil society allies, served as a crucial catalyst, advocate, and servant of all to help heal and reform the post-war world. Through our ongoing Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity and its key programmatic expressions, we pray that in these perilous times we may serve the world again. How we do so will perhaps test and define not only the next phase of the ecumenical movement, but in important ways, the fate of our people and our planet.

16. The Word Council of Churches is more important than ever to proclaim healing to a broken world and act upon it. To be able to do that, we need appropriate resources. The experience of being forced to terminate certain contracts this year due to our vulnerability to currency risks, should be a wake-up call. We need each member church to contribute in the way they can contribute - each one to their ability. I am very happy about the efforts of the finance committee to lead us into a campaign to increase the decisiveness of our member churches to raise the money we need to do good work in the WCC.

17. We are called, as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, to build alliances with all people of good will, to convert our spiritual pluri-crisis through the transformational spiritual values and convictions we proclaim each day in our churches. We are all about the whole oikoumene, fully engaged in and with and for the world.

18. Our spiritual and diaconal support to the victims in the various crises must always be accompanied by a political advocacy, which addresses the roots of all this human suffering.

19. In this respect I have personally greatly learned from German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed in 1945 by the Nazis for his resistance against Hitler. No one has influenced my own theological thinking more than this brilliant theologian and authentic Christian and - as a consequence of both - highly involved ecumenist!

20. For Bonhoeffer, Christians cannot withdraw into a private life. The life of Christians and that of the church must be public and must be interested in the lives of others. The church is only church, if it is "church for others." And this needs public involvement:

21. "In flight of public controversy" – says Bonhoeffer – "this person or that reaches the sanctuary of a private virtuousness. Such people neither steal, nor murder, nor commit adultery, but do good according to their abilities. But in voluntarily renouncing public life, these people know exactly how to observe the permitted boundaries that shield them from conflict. They must close their eyes and ears to the injustice around them. Only at the cost of self-deception can they keep their private blamelessness clean from the stains of responsible action in the world."

22. Bonhoeffer became very explicit about what this means already in 1933 when the Nazis took power and began actively persecuting Communists, Social Democrats and, above all, Jews.

23. In April 1933, a few days after the first boycott of Jewish stores Bonhoeffer gave a lecture to the Berlin pastors. In this presentation, he called for church action on behalf of the Jews in the face of the injustice imposed on them. He describes three ways in which the church should act in relation to the state.

24. The first action is to challenge the state to act responsibly if its actions lack responsibility. The second action is to assist the victims of wrong state action. This diaconal activity is always mandatory for the church. The third action is more radical. It is not enough, says Bonhoeffer, to bandage the wounds of the victims of a dangerous driver, but it is necessary to put a spoke in the wheels and stop him.

25. How credible are our humanitarian activities if we consciously or even programmatically remain silent towards the driving forces, which cause the suffering, which we deplore? How can we not become political if political decisions are the only way to overcome the suffering?

26. That is why I was very happy about our statement on climate change in November, when the executive committee met in Bossey. Firstly, we clearly named our spiritual basis in the God of the Bible. Secondly, we expressed our solidarity with all those affected by climate change and pledged to assist them. Thirdly, we clearly addressed the governments assembled in Sharm el-Sheikh for COP 27 to take concrete political action towards an effective ecological transformation of the global economy to limit CO2 emissions.

27. How can we deal with other issues in this wounded world in a similar way? What can we do as churches to open doors towards overcoming the terrible suffering caused by armed violence in Ukraine, Yemen, or Sudan, If we as churches are not even able to build bridges in conflicts where both sides consider themselves Christian, who else? If we did not even try, if we just duplicated the hostile activities of the parties fighting against each other, what would we as churches be good for? We would betray our Lord Jesus Christ of whom the Letter to the Ephesians says: "Christ is our peace" (Eph. 2:14)!

28. This is the case in Ukraine. So many people, above all Ukrainian civilians including women and innocent children, whose houses are destroyed and whose lives are threatened by bombs and rockets, go through terrible suffering. Innumerable soldiers on both sides have been killed. People all over the world suffer from rising prices for food and other daily necessities because of this war.

29. Therefore, dear brothers and sisters: whether we can find consensus amongst our member churches on ways to overcome the daily suffering in this war is not only a question of church politics. It is a spiritual question. It is an ecclesiological question. It touches the very basis of our being as the church.

30. I am very aware of how different our situations are in each of our societies in relation to our governments. Speaking up prophetically in one country might cause not more than some poisoned comments on Facebook or some counter critique from the realm of politics. Doing the same in another country can put you to prison or even endanger your life. While we have to take these differences into account and support each other in a brotherly and sisterly way, there cannot be any doubt that we all have the task of doing everything we can to overcome violence, stop the killing and struggle for a just peace based on the dignity of every human being created in the image of God. Let us keep working together in this spirit and not shy away from mutual challenge and both loving and honest mutual exchange.

31. We might have to struggle. We might have to have patience. We might have to overcome obstacles. But I am deeply convinced that God will give us the spiritual power to be the sign of unity for the world which God has called us to be.

32. Recently, I experienced how something new and bright can arise from the darkest darkness. I was invited to give a speech at the commemoration of the 78th anniversary of the liberation of the Flossenbürg concentration camp, which is located in my Bavarian church. About 500 people had come from all kinds of countries to commemorate the victims of the concentration camp. And there were seven survivors of the concentration camp. I did not feel any hatred from them. I felt a very touching community of people who are determined not to let evil grow again from the bad things that happened in that place, but to let it become a breeding ground for a world in which all people can live in dignity and in which people treat each other with respect and love spreads.

33. We also commemorated a man who had been executed only a few meters from the place where we had gathered, many years ago, on April 9, 1945, a few weeks before the liberation of the concentration camp. The words of this man on the good that can come from evil have become famous. This man was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In a time of trial, he wrote down these words:

34. "I believe that God can and will bring good out of everything, even out of the most evil. For this, he needs people who let all things serve them for the best... I believe that God wants to give us as much resilience as we need in every adversity. But he does not give it in advance, so that we do not rely on ourselves, but on him alone. In such faith, all fear of the future should be overcome."

35. Dear sisters and brothers, let us engage in the reflections and discussions of this week in this spirit of faith, hope, and love. Let us be conscious that our voice is needed. Let us open ourselves up to Christ, whose love moves us to reconciliation and unity.