



# World Council of Churches

A worldwide fellowship of 349 churches seeking unity, a common witness and Christian service

## **The full text of Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit's Keynote Address to the Gathering of Covenanted Churches in Wales at Aberystwyth, 13 October 2012**

### **The Unity We Seek: Reflections on Ecumenism Today**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It is a pleasure to be with you here in Aberystwyth to take part in your conversations and your celebration as covenanted churches in Wales. I am very grateful for the invitation and the warm welcome you have given me. I have been asked to contribute to your conversations by sharing some of my reflections on unity. These reflections have developed in my time as General Secretary, and particularly through participation in gatherings such as yours happening around the world.

This is the third historical event this week that I have addressed as the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches because of their import in regard to the theme of life-affirming unity. The earlier occasions were the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962, and the awarding yesterday of the Nobel Prize for Peace to the European Union.

Vatican II was a remarkable initiative. In reading its documents, my conviction is that unity is a gift of God given in the body of Christ, where we all need each other. To work for the unity of the Church is to work for the unity of all life, and to acknowledge and celebrate this unity given by God in the many cultures, contexts and languages of the earth. United within the body of Christ, the Church stands in solidarity with all humanity and all creation, praying for the ultimate welfare of all.

And the day after that anniversary, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that this year's Peace laureate is going to the European Union. At a time when the EU is confronted by difficult challenges and struggles both internally and in its external relations, endeavouring to uphold just and equitable relationships which make for peace, the award is an encouragement to focus on the values of peace and solidarity in the search for a viable and vital future, the need for a mutually accountable unity.

Today I find myself in the company of Christians in Wales, exploring new means of covenanting together for the glory of God and the bringing together of God's people in unity and peace.

I am glad that you are gathered to discuss your common life as churches. "Unity" belongs to the concepts that should be constantly discussed. Life is changing, also the life of the churches and their life together. So are their understanding of unity, their challenges to unity and their contributions to it. Unity needs new expressions of life, as you give these days with your initiatives. WCC needs new initiatives like the ones you are undertaking.

Unity is an intrinsic dimension of life, like the lichen that grows on the bare rock. Christian unity is an intrinsic dimension of God's grace to us. It belongs to our faith, as we also confess it together in the Creeds of the Early Church. To belong to Christ means to belong to the Body of Christ, the Church. When we are granted from God our creator and life-giver a relationship to Christ through our baptism, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we are also given a connection to all others who are in the same relationship. If we do not have this as a starting point for our reflections on unity, we will get lost in our discussions. Unity in the Body of Christ is not something we are making; it is given to each one of us. We are called to be what we are in the mysterious fellowship in Christ, members of the same body, branches on the same tree, living stones in the same building.

At the same time, being given a gift makes us stewards of the gift. We are the stewards of unity for today, and tomorrow, not for yesterday. Unity is the call to safeguard something that we have received and yet something always to be fulfilled, as grace, as the other values of the Kingdom of God, like Justice, Peace, Joy in the Holy Spirit, as life itself. Therefore, the calling to unity is not something we can remember or ignore, have on our agenda or not. It is there, as a dimension of being given the gift of new life in Christ. We cannot receive Christ without being included in Christ's love, in the fellowship of the triune God, through Christ's prayer.

Doing what unity requires is a fulfilment of what we are and what we are called to be. «The world is too strong for a divided church», were the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu when the struggle against apartheid was at the most intense. What you do shows whether you live alone, or in need of others. The expression that "doctrine divides, service unites" could be a way to criticise the lacking outcomes of theological discussions and work in the ecumenical movement. It could also be interpreted positively, as a confirmation of the enormous potential of common service, common actions, and common initiatives; as we get our focus away from ourselves, our internal differences, and to the needs of the created world in which God has placed us.

The WCC has chosen a theme for the 10th Assembly: "God of Life, Lead us to Justice and Peace." The discussion was serious, long and not so easy before the decision

was made. Some would have liked to add "Unity" somehow in the theme. It became a challenging decision but through it I think we learned something more about the unity that we seek.

Lack of justice in a fellowship, and maybe particularly in the church, undermines the life together in peace that must qualify any expression of unity. Unfortunately, but still as a reality, injustice has happened and happens also inside the church as structure and as fellowship. No idea or experience of unity in the church has integrity if justice not been properly observed or established. Sometimes justice can only be achieved if there is a proper critical or prophetic voice expressing the need for change to bring injustice to an end.

Any prophetic voice must, however, be serving a wider goal than protest and change; there must be a vision of unity in peace that is carrying the witness for justice. Peace is the goal of any work for justice, a peace that is life-giving, life-nurturing, bringing the elements of life together for the purpose of life together. Peace is something we understand better when we do not have it. The unity of the church needs the strong and rich concept of peace, shalom, saalam. The unity of the church requires efforts to overcome enmity, antagonism, condemnations, and conflict. But again, we do not need harmony that covers up the realities, only when the peace is a just peace it can serve the real unity we seek.

In 1961 the WCC held its assembly in New Dehli, India. At that extraordinary meeting, a new way of speaking about unity was proposed. Please allow me to quote from the statement: *"We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people."*

This expression of unity came at a time of great expansion and change for the WCC, including the membership of many more Orthodox Churches and institutional consolidation. Unity cannot be manifested only as an international organization, in an office in Geneva. The unity we seek must be something that has a meaning and a proven reality in the local context of the church, as you know very well. I think most ecumenists have realized that this might be the toughest part of the ecumenical endeavours. It might be easier for some to find unity in an international meeting than for those who are living in the same village or having the Sunday services in church buildings in the same street.

I believe, though, that exactly the international ecumenical movement is given as special gift to the churches to widen the horizon, to be able to look at ourselves from outside, to see other proportions and dimensions, also to be able to look at the neighbour with other eyes. My own church, the Church of Norway, has greatly benefited from participation in international ecumenical bodies, to learn that Christian worship can be more than we had before, to learn that women and men can both serve in the ordained ministry of the church, to learn that the proper response call to mission is more than sending missionaries from Norway, but also how the churches in other countries, with other confessions, even in other parts of the world can help the church in Norway to be church. I am very interested to hear during your meeting how you in Wales have been encouraged to think differently about your churches, your ministry and mission from your encounters globally, nationally and locally. Perhaps it is in having a vision of ecumenism and of unity that is broad that we can best see what is possible in our own context.

Making unity something real and experienced for churches is a challenge. The unity we seek and which the world needs is something that must be manifested in actions and structures, in fulfilling duties, being open to Christ's presence among us and being open to one another. In the gospel of Luke we read:

*Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. (Luke 24:13-17)*

This walk together on the road to Emmaus is a place of revelation for the disciples. It is a story about people moving, not only physically, but moving in their hearts and minds. From a place of sadness and a sense of solitude the disciples move to a place of transformation where "their eyes were opened and they recognized him." This inner and outer journey with the risen Christ became part of a wider movement towards the ends of the earth, an ecumenical movement.

Today we continue in this journey with one another. As we walk together in faith, in our desire to reflect Jesus' prayer "that all may be one," we must remind one another of the importance of remaining open to new experiences, open to the words and ideas of those with whom we journey and who we encounter on the road. We must be open to the possibility of a new recognition of Jesus Christ in our midst and to the transformation of our life together in the light of God's revelation through the cross and resurrection. A new statement on unity that is being developed by the WCC for the Busan Assembly next year says it this way: "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."

In 1975 as you began the journey that would lead to the covenanting process you said to one another "We approach our task with openness to the Spirit." As covenanted churches in Wales your task today is to find ways to encourage each other to continue to be open to new experiences, new ways of acting and coming together, new ways of meeting and experiencing our common faith, new ways of sharing in God's mission in and for the world.

We must always remember that "covenant," properly understood, is an action initiated by God and not an action simply between human beings. A covenant is something in which the faithfulness of God is present despite our struggles and even failures. To be in covenant, then, means that we must always seek the presence and action of God in our midst, just as those disciples on the road to Emmaus learned. It means that what is important is not really the mechanism or structure that we give to "covenant", but the qualities of our fellowship with God and with each other. The covenant of God with Israel was about the renewal of relationship, a restoration of both the created world and the faithful community. In the desire to deepen the experience as covenanted churches in Wales, this biblical vision must not be obscured.

In speaking of the qualities of our relationship together it is important to speak also of mutual accountability. This means that part of the commitment with God and with each other as churches involves not only encouragement on the journey, but also question, challenge and critique. It means being open about our own experience, even as it is challenging, and asking for that same openness in return. Mutual accountability as churches in covenant involves asking each other to offer account of ecumenical commitment and activity.

My brothers and sisters, the unity we seek should be both a hope and a challenge.

Unity, understood as growing together, gives us hope for a life together, a life in solidarity, a life where we can be included and strengthened, becoming able to be more than we can be alone. Moreover, growing together can be a way to manage common challenges. I think we know that the churches in some parts of the world are facing dramatic challenges in terms of diminishing membership and resources. In other parts of the world, churches are challenged by their surroundings, uncertainty about issues of justice and peace that affects them as churches. There is a need for Christian solidarity in so many ways. There is a need for a deeper understanding of what it means to grow together, and what it means to belong together, to give one another hope. As Welsh churches, part of your ecumenical vocation is to identify where unity offers hope and possibility right here in Wales. We must always remember that growing together is also a way to discover the challenges of our differences in new ways. We cannot run away from one another. We cannot be ecumenical only with those who think and pray and act just like we do. The unity we seek is not easy, but we must not allow one another to be discouraged.

The unity of the Church is always marked by the cross. Because we carry the cross of Christ together, the reminder of the fight against injustice, the sign of God's forgiveness of all our sins and shortcomings, we know that what unites us is also what gives us hope. Today, tomorrow, forever.

A Norwegian poet, Olav Hauge, begins one of his poems with these words[1]:

*This is the dream we carry through the world  
that something fantastic will happen  
that it has to happen  
that time will open by itself  
that doors shall open by themselves  
that the heart will find itself open  
that mountain springs will jump up  
that the dream will open by itself  
that we one early morning  
will slip into a harbor  
that we have never known.*  
May God bless you, and make your dreams come true!

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WCC general secretary

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[1] *The Dream We Carry* by Olav H. Hauge, translated by Robert Bly and Robert Hedin

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