



# World Council of Churches

General Secretariat

150 route de Ferney, PO Box 2100  
CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland  
Phone: +41 22 791 6111 Fax: +41 22 791 0361  
Email: infowcc@wcc-coe.org www.oikoumene.org

Direct phone: +41 22 791 6285  
Direct e-mail: Beth.Godfrey@wcc-coe.org

Geneva, 18 April 2023

## **XXIX General Assembly of the National Council of Churches in India**

21<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> April 2023, Henry Martyn Institute, Hyderabad

Keynote address by Rev Prof Dr Jerry Pillay

General Secretary of the World Council of Churches

---

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It is my honour and pleasure to bring greetings to you on the 29th Assembly of the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) on behalf of the global ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches (WCC), which represents 352 member churches from more than 120 countries, representing over 580 million Christians worldwide.

From its formation in 1914 as the National Missionary Council and its transformation into the World Council of Churches in 1948, the fellowship has been faithfully journeying with the churches in the sub-continent. The NCCI has been a beacon of hope to Christians in India, lifting the Gospel values of Justice, Unity, and Peace and challenging the forces that marginalise some faith communities.

WCC sincerely appreciates the faithful role of NCCI, bringing together the diverse families of churches as part of the one body of Christ, highlighting your joint witness in India, nurturing ecumenical values and mentoring many Ecumenical leaders through the decades. Through the years, many who have been mentored through this fellowship have enriched the WCC and the global ecumenical movement. The ecumenism we seek and pray for is made real locally. Only a deep and living ecumenism expressed and lived in the community, local and national context can sustain the global ecumenical movement. The churches and communities in India have shown this example to the world during the 20th and 21st centuries for which we are very grateful.

### **'The Hour has come': The signs of the time.**

During this crucial period, when the people in India and communities globally are facing several existential crises, it is pertinent that you have selected the theme for the Assembly "The Hour has come; Let us get going..." The Assembly is mandating all to reflect on Jesus's challenge to his disciples in Mark 14:41b-42 "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has

come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

We need to understand these words, “The hour has come; let us get going...” in the biblical context in which it is framed. Jesus is about to go to the cross to face death and fulfil his mission on earth of bringing the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life to all who will believe. His hour has now come!

### **1. Gethsemane is a place of STRUGGLE**

The biblical narrative is set in the context of Gethsemane, a place of struggle. A place in which we have to navigate and negotiate the tension between self-will against God’s will. It is a place of *indecision* that says, “I don’t know what to choose.” It is a place of *decision* in that I know that I must really do the Father’s will but it is so difficult, just as Jesus expresses in the passage. Do I cop out? Do I say, “away with what God wants, it’s all about me and what I want?” Let me choose the safe option. Gethsemane is a struggle of choice!

In some senses, every day we are in Gethsemane. We are there as we struggle in our choices in life as we ask: “Whom shall we please?” Is it God, myself, my family, my friends, my country, the world? Virtually every day we journey through turmoil, conflict, injustices, hardship, pain and suffering. We are asking in anguish and agony: “Father, what shall we do?” And, we pray that God would ‘take this cup of suffering from us.’

In fact, the world has become our Gethsemane. A place of struggle and suffering! The place in which people daily face oppression, injustices, inequalities, deprivation, hunger, poverty, lack of access to public health, political instability, greed, violence, women and child abuse. We live in a world in which the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. We live in a world where we continue to devalue human lives, treat people as objects, care less that millions are dying, show no respect for human rights and continue to thrive on self-gain. We live in a world divided by class, caste, creed, religion, politics and economics. We live in a world where we have become accustomed to take sides, succumb to power, think about ourselves, flourish in corruption and neglect the poor masses. Our world is in crisis!

The crisis can be seen in some of the global concerns highlighted at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches last year. Allow me to mention a few:

#### **A. Climate Emergency**

The world is facing multiple shocks—geopolitical, related to energy, economics, a climate emergency, and hunger. Last month the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), comprised of the world's leading climate scientists, delivered a 'final warning' on the climate crisis. The final part of its sixth assessment report reveals the devastation that has already been inflicted

on extensive regions of the world and says only swift and drastic action can avert irrevocable damage to the world. The Global North is responsible for 92% of excess historical emissions.

Between 1990 and 2015, the carbon emissions of the wealthiest 1% of people globally were more than double that of the poorest half of humanity. The lack of willingness to share resources and to own up to the damage of excessive consumption by the rich is not only a huge problem between the wealthier and less wealthy nations-it is the reality within each society. The “Living Planet” statement issued by the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches last year urges. “Christ’s love calls us to deep solidarity and a quest for justice for those who have contributed to this emergency the least, yet suffer the most, physically, existentially, and ecologically,”. The statement further reads, “Action that does not recognize historic responsibilities for the drivers of the climate emergency and environmental degradation, and the injustice perpetrated against poor and vulnerable communities who are suffering the worst impacts while having the smallest carbon footprints, cannot qualify as faithful stewardship.”

Research done by Uppsala University and published in the journal-*Nature Sustainability*, earlier this month, confirms what peoples' movements and activists have been telling us for a long time-wealthy elites with large swimming pools and well-maintained lawns are leaving poorer communities without basic access to water in cities across the world. The study illustrates a city in my own country- South Africa-Cape Town, where upper and middle-income households make up less than 14 per cent of the city's population but use more than half (51 per cent) of the water consumed by the entire city. Informal households and lower-income households that account for 62 per cent of the city's population consume just 27 per cent of Cape Town's water. Subsequently, Chennai, another city in India almost brushed with its “day zero” of running out of ground water due to unbridled urbanisation process without being mindful of protecting the water bodies of the city. Globally over 2 billion people lacking access to clean water and about half of the world’s population lack access to safely managed sanitation facilities. Climate justice is an urgent issue of our times that requires us to say “Enough! The hour has come!”

## **B. Economic Justice: Global Debt and Food Security**

The global public debt has been rising over the last six decades and has now reached its highest levels. Currently, with Global debt at around \$300 trillion, or 350% of global GDP, 60 per cent of low-income countries and 30 per cent of middle-income countries are at high risk of defaulting on their debt. We live in a world where interest rates are raised to bring down rapidly rising inflation, which has little effect on lowering food prices. 828 million people go to bed hungry every night, and 3.1 billion people (nearly 40% of the world's population) cannot afford a healthy diet daily. We live in a world that is destroying local, diverse and traditional food production and systems to replace it with industrial agriculture, which depends on an external supply of seeds, fertilisers and

pesticides to produce food and cash crops for export markets-to help service these loans. Food sovereignty is being sacrificed to a globalised system-where the scales have been manipulated to benefit the wealthy few. The wealthy control the world`s economy. The quest for economic justice is a continued struggle for the poor and affected. The hour has come for us to say, “Enough! We will not tarry with the injustice that continues to keep people poor and hungry.

### **C. War, Conflicts and Violence**

The WCC is concerned by the ongoing war in Ukraine and the numerous factions and violence we see in various parts of the world, for example, in the Middle East and Africa. We are concerned about religiously inspired violence, ethnic, racial and gender based violence in many parts of the world. There is a spirit of restlessness driven by power, greed and fear that continues to threaten peace and harmonious living.

The ongoing war has further contributed to an arms race as more and more countries, especially in Europe, are now heavily investing in weapons and arms or potentially being affected by the Russian war in Ukraine. Furthermore countries are now backsliding from the significant progresses made in curbing the impact of climate change. By shifting to alternative, renewable and sustainable energy countries are now reopening their coal mines and have increased import of coal and oil to meet their energy requirements in the wake of boycotting Russian oil.

The hour has come for us to say Enough to the wars, conflicts, factions and violence that pervades our world. The hour has come for peace, justice, reconciliation and unity.

### **D. Health and Wellbeing**

The 11th Assembly also reflected on the struggles associated with health and well -being. The signs of the times point to a society that does not sufficiently care for the well-being and health of others. The COVID-19 Pandemic has laid bare the deep inequalities in societies and how the vulnerable people and those pushed to the margins of society suffered the most. Even as the world is struggling to come out of the Pandemic, we know that in most contexts in the world, there is poor access to quality health care. In many countries, a person is more likely to die from receiving poor-quality care than from going without care entirely. Studies show that 5.7 million people die in low and middle-income countries every year from poor-quality healthcare compared with the 2.9 million who die from lack of access to care. The hour has come to say no to such discrepancies and inequalities.

### **E. Growing trend of populism across the globe and political and religious intolerance**

We have also seen in the recent past a rise of populism across the globe. According to the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), populists campaign on anti-establishment and anti-elite

platforms, and claim to represent the 'true interests' of the people at large, which may not be true. Despite an increase in economic inequality and a decline in social mobility, today those who are 'left behind' seem to care more about immigration and civil rights than they do about redistribution, and sometimes support policies that run counter to their economic interests. The populism policies of the government has left behind the minorities in their countries and political and religious intolerance is forcing many of them to flee their countries fearing for their lives and future. The increasing struggles of refugees and immigrants seeking a better life is becoming alarming and of huge concern. The hour has come to say, "Enough!"

Gethsemane is a place of struggle. In this context, Jesus asked his disciples why they are sleeping when they should be praying. Jesus poses the same question to us in the midst of the world's struggles and challenges some of which I have just described. In such a context, we must be prompted to say "Enough!" to injustices, inequalities and intolerance. It is not by accident that Jesus expresses his frustration with the disciples because they are sleeping when they should be praying. Prayer draws us into the mind of God. Prayer helps us to know the will of God. Prayer enables us to do what God calls us to do. Prayer makes the impossible, very possible. Gethsemane is a place of prayer in the midst of struggle and battles. Prayer is the starting point but not the only thing we do.

## **2. Gethsemane is a place of SURRENDER**

Jesus expressed his struggle in the words: "Take this cup of suffering from me." However, it did not end there. If it did, it would have been tragic. He continued in the very next breath to say, "Yet, not my will, but your will be done." Gethsemane is a place of surrender-surrendering to the will of God. It is not giving up but giving in to what God desires and stands for. It is not self-resignation but a personal exclamation that we cannot do it without God. It is not passive submission but active and believing hope. This is precisely what the prophet Jeremiah speaks about in chapter 29. He was saying let us live in hope - a hope that God gives to us. A hope that says this is not the end. It is not always going to be like this, we have the promise of a better future. A hope that speaks of restoration, liberation, freedom and a new life!

In full view of the cross, Jesus had a picture of the empty tomb. This gave him hope and joy to endure the cross in anticipation of the resurrection and the gift of eternal life to others. The Apostle Paul tells us that in the midst of our 'groans' we can have hope. God is our hope! Hope calls us to surrender to the will of God. Now it gets tricky. What is the will of God? God does not will that we live in suffering and pain. Sin, greed, power and the human will is what does that to us. It has wrecked the earth! That is why God longs to give us a new heaven and a new earth. What is God's will?

It is that we should believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God sent to save us, and the world. It is that we should “love justice, show mercy and walk humbly with our God”. It is that we should love and serve one another. It is that we should put the interest of others before ourselves. It is that we submit to the reign and presence of God, that we live out his kingdom ideals. In essence, it is that we should work toward justice, peace and reconciliation. To surrender to the will of God does not just mean that we must simply leave it to God. It means that we must become the instruments and agents of God seeking God’s justice and peace in the world. It means standing where God stands, advocating and campaigning for what God desires. God stands with the poor and oppressed. God stands for justice and peace. This is where we must stand. We do not stand where it is comfortable, with the rich and powerful, where we stand to gain and at the expense of others. We stand with God. We are called to stand where God stands. It is always with the poor and needy and with those who are in need of justice and freedom. Jesus, in Gethsemane, surrendered to the will of the Father and went to the cross; it opened the way to the gift of (eternal) life.

As we face our Gethsemane, we need to learn to surrender to the will of God. As we work for justice, peace and reconciliation, we are standing in the will of God. God does not only want to save souls. God wants to save the world, which he made and saw that it was good. Sin has messed it up. We have messed it up. God wants to restore God’s world. God calls us to stand with him and work with him to bring the fullness of life to all. Gethsemane is not a bad place to be in if God is going to get God’s way and I am going to lose mine. A young priest and an old priest were walking and talking one day, and the young priest asked: “Are you still winning your battles with God?” The senior priest responded, “No, these days I am losing to God and that is how it should be. God should always get God’s way.” Gethsemane speaks of surrendering to God’s will. The hour has come for us to surrender to God’s good, perfect and pleasing will.

### **3. Gethsemane is a place of SECURITY**

Gethsemane is a place of agony, pain and suffering but it is also a place of security. Jesus is able to say to his disciples, “Rise, let us go”. In spite of his anxiety and fear, he is willing to confront the cross. In as much as he sees the cross and death, he knows that a crown of victory and hope awaits him in the resurrection. He has the assurance of the Father’s presence and security. He knows he will be raised again strong and victorious. Gethsemane tells us that we can trust God. We should be confident enough to confront and launch out in faith and hope even in the face of suffering and death. In the Gethsemane encounter, strange as it seems, we can find security in the Risen Christ. This hope is given to all who believe and who struggle for justice, peace and reconciliation today in the world. It is the security we have in the Risen Lord, Jesus, who says: “I have come that you may have life and have it in abundance/fullness”. The security that presents courage and hope as twin sisters. A courage that raises hope in the face of death. So, Jesus could say to his disciples, “Rise, let us go!”

Gethsemane is a place of agony, struggle and suffering but it is also a place of surrender and security as we rest in the will of God for justice, peace and reconciliation in the world. Gethsemane is a dreadful place to be in but it is not a bad place to be in. In fact, rather find me in the garden of Gethsemane than in the Garden of Eden – comfort, choice and leisure. Gethsemane does not give me that; it speaks about suffering and real life. It tells me that I need God and I need him now. It is a place of hope, trust and dependence in the midst of struggle and suffering. It makes me a *real* Christian in the experience of real life. It helps me to watch, pray and work with God to bring about the fullness of life for all. Rise, let us go the hour has come for us to make a difference in the world.

### **Rise, let us go together**

Thus far, I tried to explore the theme of the Assembly in the biblical context of Gethsemane as a place of struggle, surrender and security in Christ. Let me now turn to some concluding remarks as I reflect on what the Hour has come for in the context of the world and, especially, in India today. The Hour has come for:

#### **1. Christian unity and witness**

In an hour such as this, we are challenged by Jesus to get going. Just before he woke up his drowsy disciples, Jesus was praying intensively, including for his disciples. As part of the prayer, he prayed *that they may all be one... so that the world may believe in Jesus*. (John 17: 21). As the disciples of Jesus, we are instructed to 'get going' to transform the world together! It is a unity with the purpose of bringing hope and making the love of Jesus evident in this world wounded by inequity, injustices and divisions. The churches are called to witness to the indestructible power of love to unite and reconcile. Through the faith, we proclaim in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are called to bear a counter-cultural witness; the hope of unity, justice, and peace. And yet, despite Christ's invitation to unity, we continue to remain divided. Amid this division affecting both the world and the churches, Christ's call to unity rings out even more profoundly, especially in a context where Christians are in the minority. Christian unity can serve the world for good.

The famous hymn written in the 1960s (by Peter Raymond Scholtes) reminds us *"They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love"*. The words of Jesus that inspired the hymn reads- *'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'* (John 13:35). No! Not because of our religion, denomination, race, caste, gender, ability or ethnicity! *'Through the ages, the love of God, freely, graciously, and unconditionally given, the communion of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, is working to defeat all those forces in the world that try to separate us from God, from one another and from creation. The love of God has been made manifest in the incarnation of his Son Jesus Christ: in his compassion for so many, in his washing of his disciples' feet, in his gift of a command to love even our enemies, and by his arms stretched out in love for the world as he gave*

*his life on the cross. We see, in Christ, a love that never fails, that overcomes separation and brokenness. (Rom. 8: 38-39)'-* (Quoted from the unity statement). Referring to the same verses, we are also mandated to strive to overcome all forces that prevent each person from experiencing the love of God, to which each person is freely entitled. This entitlement is part of the right to live in dignity and free from oppression, poverty and subjugation, regardless of one's identity and status.

I know of this getting to go together-reflecting Christ's love' personally from my youth as a South African involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. We, from different races, religions and ideologies, struggled together in solidarity with those who were pushed to the margins of society and struggled against the people and forces of marginalisation.

From my context, I can also understand what Jesus's disciples underwent after this conversation. As soon as Jesus was betrayed, tried and crucified, most of his disciples-especially men, disappeared. They were devastated and afraid at the loss of their teacher and friend. They lost hope and returned, trying to keep their heads low and invisible in their old contexts and reintegrate into the lives they knew before encountering and living with Jesus.

We live in similar times. Despite this compelling message and exhortation from Jesus before his crucifixion, the forces and the circumstances we find ourselves in can lead us to despair and fear.

I am fully aware of the response to the above concerns and challenges by the Indian churches, which has significant contribution to the ecumenical movement in Asia and at the global level. India is the perfect "laboratory" to live out ecumenism, where one has the opportunity to go beyond the mere unity of the churches of various traditions and confessions. In India, one has the opportunity to relate with not only Christians from other denominations but also with people of other faiths, relating with the concept of "wider ecumenism" and truly uniting with the 'whole inhabited earth'. While the ecumenical movement in India is continuing to grapple with its challenges of today, our solidarity and cooperation is assured to remain prophetic and speaking truth to the power for justice, peace, unity and reconciliation. Being a miniscule minority in India, the Christian community, particularly the ecumenical movement continue to play the role of salt and yeast to usher the kingdom of God, here and now. With increased shrinking space for the Civil Society Organisations, including the churches, across the globe, India is no different. All strength and courage to you all for carrying this burden on you.

India has a significant role in rekindling the ecumenical fervour drawing from its diverse confessional, denominational and multi-faith and multi-cultural context. I want to walk by your side as you live out ecumenism in your day- to-day struggles for justice and peace.



## **2. Transformative Discipleship**

The overwhelming challenges we face today calls for transformative discipleship. Jesus encountered his disciples after his resurrection, as narrated in the Gospel according to John in chapter 21, and transformed their lives for good. It is appropriate and timely for us to reflect on this encounter, especially during this Easter season. That morning, he faced his disciples, generally discouraged, hopeless, and even unsuccessful in their old profession as fisherfolk. Jesus guided them to succeed in their fishing. He even prepared an outdoor grill, cooked fish, and offered bread and fish as breakfast for the disciples, who had abandoned him in his time of need. Jesus did not reprimand his disciples for not following his instructions to 'Get Going'. He first met their immediate needs- catching fish and satiating their hunger. Then he poses the poignant question to Peter three times- Do you love me? Peter represents all his disciples, including us. Jesus is asking us the same question. To Peter's affirmation that he loves Jesus three times, Jesus commissions him to feed and tend his flock each time. This time, we know that his disciples were convinced, abided in Jesus by sharing and living the Gospel far and wide. They got going together so the good news was believable! That is the reason we gather here today. By abiding in Jesus, their despair was transformed into hope. Their fear was transformed into courage. Their disconnectedness from truth into loving and righteous engagement with the realities of the day. The disciples of Jesus translated their Hope in Jesus into action. Translated Hope into praying, serving, listening, caring, mentoring, nurturing, healing and above all, loving! Transformed by the power of the resurrection they went out as transformed disciples to transform the world with the presence of the Risen Lord. The disciples did not die with him on that Good Friday but later they would die *for* him as they proclaimed the Risen Jesus to the world with courage and hope. In the midst of continued challenges faced by Christians in your country, it is important that you have the courage and hope to 'Get up and go' to proclaim the good news of life in Christ in India and beyond.

## **3. Prophetic Witness**

Transformative discipleship must include prophetic witness, the call to repentance, justice and a new way of living. India, for hundreds of years has shown the world that unity in diversity is possible and that people can live peacefully amidst their pluralistic religious, ethnic, linguistic backgrounds. India also being the world's largest democracy has adhered to its democratic principles to a great extent. One cannot compare a country of 1.3 billion people with such complex diversity with other more or less homogenous countries with a much smaller population in the West. Indian democracy has reached such a level of maturity that freedom of speech and dissent are considered inherent rights of the citizens of the country, as opposed to some other countries in the world. Thus, it makes global headlines when these democratic rights and principles of the people of this country are sometimes violated in the hands of some fringe elements, who believe in the "majoritarian rule". There is a major responsibility of the democratic governments of any

country to reassure its citizens about their rights and freedom, particularly to those who are a minority in the country. While we are concerned about the news of the minorities being attacked and harassed for their religion, ethnic background, race in many countries, including in India, we encourage the governments to reassure those affected and take action against those who perpetrate violence and hatred against the minorities. In India, my solidarity is with all the victims of violence particularly from the indigenous people, dalits and other minorities including Christians and other vulnerable communities.

During this crucial period, when the people in India and communities globally are facing several existential crises, it is important for Christians to work together in unity and love and to bear prophetic witness in the face of injustices, inequalities and dehumanising systems and practices. The hour has come!

#### **4. Conclusion**

Once in San Diego a ship strayed off course and became stuck on a reef at low tide. Twelve tugboats tried to release it but it failed. The Captain sent them back and waited until “high tide” and then it found its way back into the sea. It let loose and went in. We are living in the “high tide” of sin, suffering, struggle and violence in the world. Is it not time that we let go of all our straps of self-security and comfort, and launch out into the deep as we surrender to God’s will? God’s will is that we work for justice, peace and reconciliation. Sometimes this may mean going out of our own comfort zones and sense of security. Sometimes it may mean changing our own views and perceptions about things. Sometimes it may mean challenging our own biblical and theological views as we try to understand what is going on in the world. It is only when we do this that we will discover that our real and true security is not in what the world offers us but in what God wills for us.

The WCC realises the challenges we face in the world today and is prepared to rise and get going to work towards a better world for all creation. Commissioned and moved by the love of Christ we seek to continue on the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity.

I invite in the context of India to ask what this might mean for you, what God is calling you to *be* and to do. Jesus asked his disciples why they were sleeping and not praying. Is this accusation true also for the church today? We rather sleep than pray because it is easier. When we wake up the reality is still with us, not gone, maybe worse. Prayer calls us into action. It calls us to sing the Lord’s song, difficult as it may be, with hope and joy.

I remember walking on the streets of Soweto, an African township in South Africa, in the dark days of apartheid. I was expecting to see people living in misery and hopelessness in their situation of oppression and poverty. However, what I saw was people dancing, singing and rejoicing and I

asked myself how this is possible. It was possible because they sang the Lord's song which gave them hope, courage and joy in the midst of suffering and pain.

The call of Jesus to the disciples to "Rise! Let us go!", is a call to prayer, protest, prophecy, and praxis (action). It is a call to the church to awake from its sleep and slumber, from comfort, privilege, complacency, complicity, indifference and self-occupation.

As I appreciate the work and witness of the NCCI and as I have reflected on the volatile global and local context, I say to you today, "The hour has come. Rise, let us go" and sing the Lord's song of grace, salvation, justice, peace and reconciliation in a broken and suffering world.

May God continue to sustain and keep you in courage and hope!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jerry Pillay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jerry" being more prominent and the last name "Pillay" following in a similar style.

Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay  
General Secretary  
World Council of Churches