



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

## **Address of Baldwin Sjollema, the first director of the PCR to the WCC Central Committee 2018**

*Moderator, members of the Central Committee, dear friends,*

Thank you for allowing me to address you at this special session celebrating the 70th birthday of the WCC. I was present as a visitor at its creation in Amsterdam in 1948, curious to know what went on!

I am aware that I am a survivor and that what I am going to say refers to history. I am aware also that I am speaking to a new and different ecumenical generation. Neither can the world situation of now be compared with what it was in the 1960s-70s-80s.

What I want to do is remind ourselves how we tried to make a small contribution towards the renewal of the church in the world-then, according to what we understood our biblical faith to be. I have been asked to speak about racism and apartheid, as the churches and Christians world-wide tried to cope with this most dangerous cancer in our society.

Today, many have forgotten about the past; others find the past irrelevant for today's world: that was then, and this is now. We seek to forget rather than to remember.

Speaking to you as the responsible authority for the future of the WCC, I want to quote George Santayana who said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Maybe he was not wrong?

Perhaps the most important and urgent issue for us all today is: How do we, how *can* we live together as people of different cultures, races, and religions?

To be ecumenical means to see oneself as a part, a member of the "oikos" , the household of God.

The fundamental ecumenical issue raised by the Programme to Combat Racism was and remains for Christians whether they would accept to live in this enlarged household.

When the churches met at the WCC Assembly in Uppsala in 1968, they were confronted with a world in turmoil. And the question then was whether they would be able to cope with that world's agenda? The number of member churches had increased considerably, mainly from the so-called developing world. The Council had become more truly a world council. At Uppsala a real confrontation with the world's most urgent issues took place, notably on racism, but also on development which was the other burning issue that was tackled (remember creation of the Churches Commission on Participation and Development-CCPD), and not to forget either the issues related to gender, women and men in church and society.

In what follows, I can only concentrate on one key question, that of *racism*. That issue had been on the WCC's agenda ever since its inception. But the problem then was that the Council limited itself to making statements and that the member churches did not really follow-up. The suffering notably of the Black people in Southern Africa and the USA deeply affected the ecumenical movement. Martin Luther King had been invited as the opening preacher at Uppsala. By linking racism with poverty and oppression and speaking-up about the war in Vietnam, King had opened our eyes to situations the world over. His biblical message on non-violence to achieve basic change made clear that he was a prophet of our times. King was a true servant of God. He walked beside his fellow black people and also beside the white oppressors, dreaming the dream of a united society. His assassination shortly before the Assembly underscored the importance of combatting racism. What remained after his death was his witness, his challenge and his cry: "I have a dream" - and our response: "We have a dream!"

At the Uppsala Assembly, twenty years after its foundation, the WCC had accepted that a new type of response was needed to the most urgent challenges of our world. It was the time of outbursts of liberation theologies in Latin America, Africa, Asia and among the Afro-Americans. It was also a time of crisis, of protest and resistance against existing social and political structures and in support of the liberation movement in the Portuguese colonies, as well as in Rhodesia, Namibia and last but not least in South Africa; apartheid in South Africa.

The ecumenical fellowship clearly recognized in these developments a *kairos*, a God-given opportunity to act. Racism was not just one amongst many injustices: it was a specific Christian heresy. Thus we had to pass from words to acts of *direct solidarity* with the racially oppressed.

This made the Assembly decide that the Council *itself* should take the initiative to start a programme of action to show the way to and in collaboration with its member churches. This decision was a radical departure from the past. One year later the 1969 Central Committee decided to create a WCC Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) of which I then became its first director.

The Central Committee also decided to focus on the most dangerous form of racism, namely *white* racism. Analysis made clear that besides supporting organisations of the racially oppressed directly through grants of a Special Fund, we would have to deal with the *structures of power* that create and strengthen racism. Churches had to name these powers and address them directly. The banks, the multinationals, the governments. We published lists naming the culprits demanding that banks and multinationals accept basic change, thereby weakening the racist structures in a non-violent way. That was unheard of in the churches. But such policies and actions were not new for the United Nations and many secular non-governmental organisations in the USA and the West. Notably the anti-apartheid movements the world-over were already involved in such work. But for most churches this was new. WCC's initiative could only bear its fruits if these policy-proposals would receive the active support from the national and local church levels.

We were no longer exclusively concerned about *personal* racist attitudes. We perceived that *structural and collective racism* through power mechanisms and economic systems were much more dangerous. Above all the churches needed to eliminate racism within their *own* ranks before they could genuinely take part in the wider struggle in society. How to engage and commit Christians nationally and locally? Heated discussions took place in many synods, national councils of churches and local ecumenical groups. That is where the real debate took place. People asked: is this really the role of churches in society? Shouldn't we limit ourselves to preaching the Gospel on Sunday and leave it to each individual Christian to translate the biblical message into practice ?

The WCC itself had to give a clear sign of its own commitment as an organisation. That is why in 1981, after a careful study, it decided to cut its relations with three of its major banks: UBS (Union Bank of Switzerland), SBS (Swiss Bank Corporation), and the Dresdner Bank. Member churches were asked to do the same and several did. Equally important, individual Christians started to close their bank accounts and to question management of multinationals at shareholder meetings. This became a tremendous movement in which people of all walks of life were involved, Christians and others alike. We linked-up with the *secular world* anti-apartheid movement.

In addition, many local church and ecumenical groups spontaneously collected funds in support of liberation movement in Southern Africa.

It became clear in people's mind that most liberation movements had tried for many years to find peaceful solutions and that the real issue was *the violence of colonial and apartheid governments* who were largely supported by the West.

Churches listened to and heard the voices of the oppressed. *The racially oppressed became the yardstick for our action.* Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: "We have learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled- in short, from the perspective of those who suffer."

What we needed was renewal of the churches, *costly* discipleship and *costly* renewal. This cuts deep in our veins, it hurts. It has to do with giving up our privileges in order to be at the disposal of others (*être disponible*). "Every one to whom much is given," said Jesus, "of him (*and her*) much will be required". (Luke 12:48). That is a warning about privilege, but it is also a mandate for responsible action that results in freedom, freedom not only for oneself but freedom for others.

Much of the reluctance on the part of the Western churches had to do with their historical links to the white churches in southern Africa and a lack of understanding of post-colonial developments. To them solidarity primarily meant support for the white establishment, to their white counterparts in Southern Africa: the white churches. And this was precisely what the WCC was calling into question. Ecumenical theology highlighted the structural problem: how to achieve justice for peoples, and how to express real solidarity with the oppressed instead of giving paternalistic advice?

South Africa was no longer to be seen as a white nation with a black problem, but as a black nation under white oppression. We needed to analyse the situation anew from the perspective of the black people. This was totally new thinking for many Christians and churches in Europe and created tensions at many church levels. People asked: Is the WCC becoming a political, a Marxist body? In fact we were involved in a world-wide confrontation between the oikoumene of solidarity and sharing, on the one hand, and the oikoumene of domination and dependence on the other.

Costly discipleship, we experienced, always entails confrontation with the principalities and powers of this world.

I had the privilege of having a close relationship with several of the liberation movement leaders. Most of these leaders had been educated by the missions. One of them, Oliver Tambo was the acting president of the African National Congress (ANC) during the time of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment on Robbin Island. One day Tambo told me: "You should understand that where I was brought up, in an Anglican Boarding School in South Africa, we were read the scripture-lesson every day.

And the one thing that I remember from the Bible during those years is that *the Gospel is about liberation*; liberation not just of me personally but liberation also of my people. That is what I am involved in day after day. That is what our liberation movement is about. Can't you tell this to your German bishops?"

Was the PCR one of the WCC's success stories? I am afraid that what happened is that in the end many churches believed that the WCC had gone too far and that a programme like the PCR was a danger to the unity of the churches. Member churches became concerned that the WCC weakened their individual status. The question is whether the member churches were really ready to make the leap to which they had originally decided themselves? I am not so sure, after all.

Yes, it may be justified to remember the small victories in the past. But equally important would be to ask whether there is unfinished business?

In retrospect, the WCC, through its Programme to Combat Racism, made a real contribution to the liberation of the people of southern Africa. It was understood by the oppressed as such. Perhaps this was best illustrated by the historic visit of Nelson Mandela to the WCC in Geneva in 1990 shortly after his liberation during which he addressed the whole staff and expressed his genuine gratitude for the solidarity shown by the WCC and its member churches to the people in South Africa during the most difficult years of its struggle for freedom.

The PCR has shown that *action speaks louder than words*. It also renewed the discussion in the churches on violence, the violence of the oppressor and the right to self-defense by the oppressed. The real choice was not between violence and non-violence but between justice and injustice. There can be *no peace without justice*.

Combatting racism sparked-off a much broader discussion about the responsibility of the churches and Christians in economic life.

The most important question remains however what if anything the PCR meant for the racially oppressed themselves? For many of them the God of Christians over the last centuries had been the God of slavery, of colonisation, of cultural and physical genocide, of death.

I believe that the WCC, through its Programme to Combat Racism, gave some hope to racially oppressed people in many parts of the world. In this sense PCR was a *missionary programme*, directed especially towards its constituency in the *West*.

Combating racism is about taking sides, challenging injustice and even getting angry. The issue was that *black people had to be in charge of their own destinies*. That issue has clearly not been resolved.

During the 1960s, 70s and 80s the ecumenical agenda was clear and the voice of the Council counted. At this point I want to pay a special personal tribute to Philip Potter, our then general secretary, who inspired me and many others. We became « *compagnons de route* » (companions on the way). His authority stemmed from his collegiality. He helped me to understand what living-out one's faith is about. In hindsight I seriously ask myself the question: what would have happened to the PCR if Philip Potter had not become general secretary?

Today, after 70 years of existence, WCC has lost its pioneering role. It can no longer take such initiatives on its own. The PCR as a means of combating racism has served its purpose. In the 1970s, we thought we were on the way to the Promised Land, but today we seem to be wandering again in the desert, nervously looking for the next oasis.

What about the challenge today?

During the past decades we have witnessed unprecedented globalisation and vast flows of refugees and migrants. This flow is increasing and underlines the need to challenge racism and discrimination head-on.

As world crises intensify, so are expressions of fear and hatred. Terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists have given rise to growing "*Islamophobia*".

This is a matter of deep concern. Hatred of *Jews* and reducing the *Holocaust* to a footnote in history are raising ugly heads in certain countries. *White supremacy* is still very much alive, as recent developments have shown in the United States (I want to make special mention of the Black resistance movement, "Black Lives Matter").

Furthermore, as long as African countries are considered to be "shit-hole" countries we have to remain extremely vigilant concerning white racism.

*No, racism has not subsided.* The Berlin Wall has disappeared, but other walls exist, as a *symbol of exclusion rather than inclusion*, like the wall between Israel and Palestine. Today in many parts of the world borders are closed. Refugees are no longer welcome and even forced to leave their country of asylum (The Geneva Conventions are more and more questioned).

To illustrate this most burning issue, I need to mention one concrete example which has received worldwide attention over the past days: the rescue operation by the lifeboat "*Aquarius*" in the Mediterranean with some 630 refugees on board, amongst them at least 10 pregnant women and 20 or more unaccompanied children. The ship was refused entry in several European harbours and was finally allowed to dock in Spain. The courage and support of the crew, of Médecins sans frontières and the Red Cross needs to be highlighted. But in reality this incident is a major political scandal. It is totally unacceptable to treat human beings in need with a complete lack of dignity.

The present European political migration crisis takes place at the cost of thousands of human lives. European politicians seem to have lost their sense of human values. In the face of this, what is most urgently needed now is a strong *mobilisation of civil society*. The churches and the ecumenical movement could and should play an even more leading role in this mobilisation. Member churches should continue to raise their voices publicly. This is a burning issue which is preoccupying the Roman Catholic Church as well. The visit of Pope Francis to the WCC tomorrow creates an occasion to clearly show our unity in word and action on this issue.

May I suggest that this is urgent.

The question remains however: Are the churches ready to offer asylum, especially when the law seems no longer to protect people in danger? Many local initiatives do exist. Many Christians see it as their duty to take risks. But is our church leadership, if need be, willing to openly take position about *civil disobedience*? *Resistance* is a key word in the life of Christians as long as there is a threat to humanity. Today, *solidarity and hospitality* with refugees and migrants are an existential challenge to all of us.

The WCC has no longer a Programme to Combat Racism but the concerns which gave rise to creating that Programme are still very much with us today. These concerns will remain a central plank for the integrity of our Christian faith.

As an „ancien combattant“ I plead with you that together we accept the challenge:

- *the struggle continues*
- *la lutte continue*
- *a luta continua !*

**Baldwin Sjollema, 20 June 2018**

*Footnotes:*

1) George Santanyana, *The Life of Reason*, 1905

2) Ernst Lange : *The Malaise in the Ecumenical Movement. Notes on the Present Situation*, ER, Vol. 23, no. 1, p.8

3) Dietrich Bonhoeffer : *1942, Letters and Papers from Prison*, Macmillan, 1972, p. 17

4) J. Miguez-Bonino, in : *Whither Eccumenism*, WCC, 1986, pp 26 ff

*For further details see my memoirs: Baldwin Sjollema : Never Bow to Racism- A Personal Account of the Ecumenical Struggle*, WCC, 2015.