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OPEN LETTER TO THE SYNOD OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN GERMANY AND THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

By Katharina Kunter and Ellen Ueberschär

To:

the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany, the Council of
the Evangelical Church in Germany,
Annette Kurschus, Chair of the Council of the
Evangelical Church in Germany Herrenhäuser
Str. 12
30419 Hanover, Germany

To:

the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, and Ioan
Sauca, Acting General Secretary,
World Council of Churches
P.O. Box 2100CH
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

June 3, 2022

Dear Synod Members,
dear Council Members,
dear Council Chair Kurschus,

dear Members of the Central Committee,
dear General Secretary Sauca,

Russia's brutal assault on Ukraine is being waged by military as well as ideological means. The core of this war ideology is the neo-imperialist idea of a "Russian world" (*Russkiy mir*), which ultimately denies Ukraine—and other states such as Belarus—the right to exist as sovereign nations. A significant role in the promotion of the theological side of this ideology is being played by the Moscow leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)—in particular by its Patriarch Kirill—who also stylizes this war of aggression as a metaphysical struggle between good and evil.

The doctrine of *Russkiy mir* and the concept of a "holy Russia" find one of their strongest representatives and defenders in Kirill. Putin shares these ideas and uses them to legitimize his war of aggression. This makes the Moscow leadership of the ROC a key part of the Russian war machine.

Ms. Kurschus and Mr. Sauca, you have both sharply criticized ROC Patriarch Kirill and called on him to take a clear stand in opposition to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. We strongly support you in this matter and, at the same time, encourage you to act on your convictions.

For weeks, the Ukrainian churches have been fighting for their survival and positioning themselves against the Russian war of aggression. They demand a break with Patriarch Kirill, but also with other leaders of the ROC, such as Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Archpriest Nikolay Balashov, and Metropolitan Tikhon of Pskov and Porkhov, who is considered the Russian president's confessor. Metropolitan Hilarion and Archpriest Balashov in particular are considered diplomats of the Moscow Patriarchate who ideologically underpin *Russkiy mir* in close coordination with the Russian power

apparatus.

With its legitimization of war and its rejection of individual, inalienable human rights, the hierarchy of the ROC is providing an intellectual and spiritual foundation for an autocratic state power with revisionist and dictatorial characteristics. With the blessing of the church leadership, a war of aggression is being waged and human rights are being trampled underfoot at home. Human rights organizations such as Memorial, whose work focused on providing a historical perspective on Stalin's crimes—which cost thousands of priests their lives—have been banned. Priests, deacons and lay people of the ROC who do not support the war as instructed by their church leadership, but are courageously protesting it, are now also subject to repression. They are being put under pressure, accused of bogus criminal offenses and relieved of their duties. One of them is Dimitri Baev, deacon of the Church of St. John the Baptist in Kirov.

We are troubled by the prospect that the ROC, as a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC), might spread its war propaganda on German soil and falsely portray itself as a victim when the WCC Assembly convenes in Karlsruhe, Germany, from August 31 to September 8, 2022.

Despite your dedicated efforts, General Secretary Sauca, there are no indications of change in the ideological positions of the Moscow Patriarchate. On the contrary, your offer of a fraternal bridge was rejected by Patriarch Kirill with an incongruent reference to the Toronto Declaration of 1950 and followed up with renewed war propaganda and lies. We read this answer as an anti-ecumenical statement and question the ecumenical commitment of the ROC. There has been no sign of a change of heart, nor is there any willingness to engage in genuine dialogue. Such a break with the Christian tradition of reconciliation and peace must not go unanswered.

Since the founding assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, the ecumenical movement has been guided by the idea that “war is contrary to the will of God“. Is the ROC still rooted in the ecumenical movement in this situation when it justifies the Russian attack as a holy war?

The presence of senior representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate in Karlsruhe would not only mean a public loss of trust for the churches in Germany—it would be a disaster in ecumenical, church policy and human terms.

We urge you to work to ensure that:

- 1) the WCC and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) clearly communicate how the war against Ukraine and the behavior of the leadership of the ROC will be addressed at the Assembly in September and how the priority of the victims' perspective will be ensured.
- 2) a moratorium is declared on any bilateral dialogue at church leadership levels between the EKD and the Moscow leadership of the ROC. It is long overdue for the churches in Germany in particular to contribute to the sanctions that other areas of society have put in place, sometimes at high cost. This is also a sign of solidarity with the victims of the war of aggression.
- 3) the EKD intensifies its contacts with **all** churches and religions in Ukraine. We expect the EKD to focus its public communication on the suffering of the people in Ukraine and be less concerned with the poor image of Russian Orthodoxy.

- 4) at its meeting in June 2022, the Central Committee of the WCC gives a special place in the Assembly in Karlsruhe to both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine with its Metropolitan Epiphany, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—which declared itself independent of Moscow on May 27, 2022— with its Metropolitan Onufriy as well as to the Protestant Churches of Ukraine.
- 5) at its meeting in June 2022, the Central Committee of the WCC will carefully consider how a suspension of the Russian Orthodox Church's membership of the WCC can be realized.
- 6) the EKD and the WCC clearly demonstrate their solidarity with the priests, pastors, deacons, and ordinary Christians who are risking their lives by resisting the war propaganda in Russia and elsewhere.

We trust that you will seriously consider our demands in your joint preparation for the Assembly.

We are confident that you will give clear priority to the voices of those suffering in Ukraine.