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THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AT THE 11TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

The 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2022 published a statement about the war in Ukraine, *War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region*. The statement raised quite a lot of discussion in the assembly, mostly about its failure to make any concrete suggestions in order to achieve peace. This essay provides a summary of the statement and of the discussion in the assembly. The essay points out a few flaws in the statement and shows the historical frame in which the statement was written.

The 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) was held at Karlsruhe, Germany from August 31 to September 8, 2022. One of the statements made at the Assembly was about the war in Ukraine. The Russian invasion in Ukraine began in February 2022 so WCC was making statements about quite a fresh subject. Of course, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine had started already in 2014 but the statement of WCC, *War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region* took that also into account. The goal of this essay is to summarize the document and provide a brief summary about the discussion that was raised about the document in the assembly, and to place the discussion and the statement into a historical context. The main sources will be the statement, *War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region* and the video recording from the Business Plenary 6 that included the discussion in the Assembly about the statement. Some articles from media will also be used in order to provide a somewhat more comprehensive image of the discussion that took place on those topics.

The statement of WCC starts with saying that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has caused hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people since its start in 2014. Since

the invasion of Russia or since the escalation of the conflict there has been at least 13,000 Ukrainian casualties which means that all the mentioned casualties have happened in just a bit over six months. The statement also states that there have been many atrocities reported including possible war crimes and crimes against humanity. WCC raises also concerns about Ukrainian nuclear power plants where military activities have taken place in vicinity of the plants.¹

The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches had already condemned the war as illegal and unjustifiable. The assembly agrees with the Central Committee and also denounces war in Ukraine as an illegal and unjustifiable war. The assembly makes a demand that there should be an immediate ceasefire in order to prevent more deaths and destruction, and in order to open dialogue and negotiations between parties in war to secure peace.² The assembly is also on the same track with the Central Committee when they agree that war is against “God’s very nature and will for humanity” and that war is also against all the fundamental Christian principles.³

In the statement WCC makes a variety of demands. Firstly, they urge that military activities should cease from the vicinity of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Then they plead Christians and the leaders of the churches in Russia and Ukraine to raise their voices and oppose the war. The statement also asks European governments, communities, and churches to promote peace and to continue to approach clarity and dialogue.⁴

WCC adds in the statement that there has been many conflicts and crises between the 10th and the 11th assembly. WCC offers assurances that they will not forget people who have suffered during this time. They also plead that people in need should get compassionate responses and they expect that every state will honor their obligations under international law—including human rights. The statement argues that the states have the responsibility for saving lives and providing protection to people in need and this should be done without using those people as political tools by governments.⁵

Even though there are many demands and pleadings in the statement, WCC does not offer any solutions or concrete actions in order to achieve these demands or to make their requests more adequate. A delegate of Germany, Friedrich Kramer, also criticizes the document

¹ *War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region* (later I’ll refer to the statement as *Ukrainian statement*) 2022, 1.

² *Ukrainian statement* 2022, 1.

³ *Ukrainian statement* 2022, 2.

⁴ *Ukrainian statement* 2022, 2.

⁵ *Ukrainian statement* 2022, 3.

in that respect. He said that he would have hoped that the document would state how to intervene the conflict in Ukraine in a non-violent way and what kind of actions are needed to sustain peace.⁶ The statement basically only offers thoughts and prayers to the victims of the war in Ukraine and assures that Ukrainians will have all the love and support. WCC also aimed to explain its own role in the crisis; WCC will support its member churches and offers to the parties of the conflict a safe space and platform to have dialogue and to encounter.⁷ In the end WCC just states that they will continue their convening role and is willing to offer space for encounter and dialogue.⁸

I also wish to criticize the statement about its lack of clear condemnation of this the war. It seems that WCC tried to make a statement about the cruelty of the war in Ukraine and tried to show their empathy to Ukrainian people, but the statement seems to concentrate on the refugee crisis more than in the war. The statement makes frequent calls to help refugees and displaced people but does not unambiguously condemn the war or the military actions of Russia. Maybe the WCC tries to be diplomatic and does not want to take sides in the crisis. But the most obvious reason for the lack of condemnation can be heard in the discussion about the statement. A delegate of Ukraine pointed out that the Russian Orthodox Church was also taking part in the making of the statement. He also stated that the Russian Orthodox Church has the greatest number of delegates in the assembly and also in the Central Committee.⁹

According to the video recording, the majority of the assembly felt good about the statement.¹⁰ Despite that, almost every delegate who had floor made some critical comments. The delegate of the Netherlands was concerned about how the war might separate the west and the east into their distinct sides. He thinks that this should be taken into concertation in the statement and that WCC should act in a way that this kind of separation should not happen. The delegate of Norway argued that the statement should differentiate between Putin and the Russian people. In his opinion they have different perspectives and separating them would also point out the suffering that Russian people are going through.¹¹ I agree with the Norwegian delegate; not every Russian is pro-war, but it seems like majority of the Russians are supporting the war in Ukraine.¹²

⁶ WCC video 2022, 1:20:03.

⁷ *Ukrainian statement* 2022, 2.

⁸ *Ukrainian statement* 2022, 4.

⁹ WCC video 2022, 1:18:12.

¹⁰ WCC video 2022, 1:17:00.

¹¹ WCC video 2022, 1:17:28.

¹² e.g. Rogov 2023.

A Ukrainian delegate said that he is hurt because the statement talks about Russia and Ukraine in the same way. He hoped that WCC would hear Ukrainians when they are talking about Ukraine.¹³ A Ukrainian adolescent also got the floor and criticized the statement because it does not openly talk about things as they really are. According to her the statement fails to highlight the Russian aggression against Ukraine.¹⁴

A delegate of Russia criticized how everyone has only one minute to speak and therefore the Russian church cannot defend itself against all the accusations.¹⁵ He also criticized that the statement was not distributed to every delegate, so he is able to comment only according to presentation that was held right before the discussion.¹⁶ Overall the Russian delegate saw the statement as a better than expected. He thought that the statement would have been more political and more aggressive towards Russia. He argues that the statement is a part of the ongoing information war; it sheds light on some perspectives but camouflages others.¹⁷ In his opinion, part of the purpose of the statement is to defame Russian delegation and therefore the statement does not take into account all the parties that are involved in the war.¹⁸

Apparently, there were some calls to expel the Russian Orthodox Church from WCC after Patriarch Kirill gave some statements about the war in Ukraine and started to back the military actions of Russia.¹⁹ However, the Russian Orthodox Church did not lose its membership even though WCC condemned the war. The general secretary of WCC Jerry Pillay said after the decision that WCC “must try to have a fruitful dialogue and understand the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church.”²⁰ In my opinion, the decision to let the Russian Orthodox Church remain as member of WCC combined with the statement of 11th assembly looks like the WCC wants to stay as neutral as possible. Unfortunately, this puts WCC into a bad light; the member churches of the WCC clearly wanted to give more support to Ukraine but for some reason WCC failed to do it. Historically this was not the first time people wanted to exclude the Russian Orthodox Church from WCC. The Russian Church applied for a membership already in 1948 but was granted a membership in 1961. The chairman of the Central Committee in 1961 stated that nothing had really changed in Russian Church between

¹³ WCC video 2022, 1:18:12.

¹⁴ WCC video 2022, 1:28:35.

¹⁵ WCC video 2022, 1:23:20.

¹⁶ WCC video 2022, 1:23:53.

¹⁷ WCC video 2022, 1:24:30.

¹⁸ WCC video 2022, 1:25:20.

¹⁹ e.g. Jenkins, 2022.

²⁰ CNE.news 2022.

1948 and 1961.²¹ It was just a political decision to not include Russia into WCC before 1961 and it was also a political decision to let them stay in 2022.

Overall, I find it very disappointing that WCC did not make any stronger statement against the actions of Russia and did not condemn the war more powerfully. Historically the WCC was founded after the second World War as a response to war. The original meaning of the WCC was to promote peace through networks and friendship and living Christianity ecumenically. When the WCC decided to not take a strong position on the war in Ukraine it kind of promoted its original purpose; they still offer a safe space for a dialogue and try to promote friendship. But can WCC still say that they are promoting living Christianity ecumenically? I think they cannot. Just as Patriarch Kirill stated whose side the Russian Orthodox Church is, so could the WCC also have stated on whose side they are. The Christian way of living would probably mean to take the side of oppressed and give all the support to the oppressed. This is not something WCC did; one statement about the war is just not enough. Especially when the statement does not even say anything clearly when examined closely.

²¹ *Christianity Today* 1961, 735.

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