

Open letter to the global ecumenical community on the “Wuppertal Declaration“:

Not misreading the signs of the times!

“Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.”
Proverbs 31:8

*“We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice,
we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”*
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In June 2019, representatives from numerous countries and different denominational and faith traditions gathered in Wuppertal, Germany, to discuss the profound global ecological crisis. The conference was entitled “Together towards eco-theologies, ethics of sustainability and eco-friendly churches” and concluded with the adoption of the Wuppertal Call “Kairos for Creation – Confessing Hope for the Earth” (see appendix). The German organizers – the Evangelical Church in Germany, the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany, the United Evangelical Mission and Bread for the World – took the opportunity of including a far-reaching proposal with regard to the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which is likewise to take place in Germany in September 2021. The proposal calls on the global ecumenical movement to plan a decade of ecological learning, confessing and comprehensive action against climate change and to launch it at the WCC assembly.

However desirable it might be for the WCC to focus on the global climate crisis, we, the undersigned, are convinced that it would by no means be helpful if the root causes of the crises were concealed, as is the case in the Wuppertal Declaration. The latter largely disregards the systemic character of the very crisis of our capitalist civilization; instead, it reduces the necessary change to a transformation defined first and foremost in merely ecological terms. In view of the multiple crisis of the prevailing (dis)order, however, it has long been obvious that the question of ecological justice can no longer be separated from the question of economic and social justice and that a solution can therefore not solely consist in a gradual exit from our fossil-based mode of production. Instead, the issue is about overcoming the “imperial mode of living” and a fundamentally different economic system.

With its simplified and one-sided analysis the Wuppertal proposal ignores and counteracts the comprehensive and fundamental criticism of the global economic structures as expressed by the worldwide ecumenical movement between 1983 and 2013 in its systematic examination of economic globalization. This criticism is also reflected in recent ecumenical declarations on the need for a new international financial and economic architecture (NIFEA).

The unanimous tone of the clear insights gained over many years at the global level is that – as the Lutheran World Federation put it at its 10th Assembly in 2003 – the prevailing economic order, including the ideology determining its mechanisms, is tantamount to “idolatry”, since “the market, built on private property, unrestrained competition and the centrality of contracts, is the absolute law governing human life, society and the natural environment”. The deeper roots of the resulting massive threat to life were recognized a year later by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches at its General Council as “the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might. Economic systems are a matter of life or death” (The Accra Confession). The WCC was equally clear in its 2012 “Call to Action: Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All”: “Greed and injustice, seeking easy profit, unjust privileges and short-term advantages at the expense of long-term and sustainable goals are the root causes of interrelated crises (...). These life-destroying values (...) dominate today's structures.”

Against this background, the theological and ecclesiological consequence for worldwide ecumenism was expressed in almost identical terms: that the question of global economic justice is a fundamental question for faith in God and Christian discipleship, and that the prevailing economic system is incompatible with being Christian and being church on grounds of faith. Accordingly, the predominant socio-economic and geo-strategic power structures should now be questioned more clearly than ever,

and the (neo-)capitalist mode of production and living should be overcome with the aim of developing sustainable alternatives.

Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" and the encyclical "Laudato si'" have resonated encouragingly with the prophetic nature of these ecumenical resolutions. They are, however, rarely put into practice in the ecumenical movement and the churches. All too often, ecumenical action is limited to appeals for merely cosmetic reforms of the structurally destructive global economic system. This is due to a 'restraint' considered necessary to avoid conflicts with political and economic decision-makers – as in the Wuppertal Declaration, which fails to mention that social and climate justice for all people can only be achieved through a fundamental socio-ecological transformation. And this ultimately requires a radical renunciation of the capitalist driving forces of growth and profit, which have dominated our economies up to now, and a shift towards an economy that focuses on the common good and the protection of the natural life support systems. Or to quote the global climate movement Fridays for Future: "System change, not climate change!"

The WCC's 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe in 2021 and the election of a new WCC general secretary in August 2020 offer the opportunity to initiate what we consider to be the indispensable reorientation of the WCC towards a renewed, much more intensive and, above all, determined engagement with the crises of survival of humankind and creation, and their causes. A "Decade for the Healing of Creation" may well provide the framework, but only if its thrust is appropriate to the dangerous nature of the threats. In view of the dramatic signs of the times, we would like, with this Open Letter, to pave the way for a debate on this issue in the run-up to the Assembly – and not just at Karlsruhe itself. We hope such a debate can be open-minded and take account of the entire breadth of the ecumenical movement.

April 20, 2020

Among the first signatories are

from abroad: Bishop Antonio Ablon (Philippines), ARGE Schöpfungsverantwortung / the Board (Austria), Assemblée Œcuménique (France), Raúl G. Alfonso Padilla (Argentina), Joseph Bock (Belgium), Bocs Global Think Tank Foundation (Hungary), Prof. Dr. Nancy Cardoso Pereira (Brazil), Rev. Canon Peter Challen (Great Britain), Rev. em. Marc Dandoy (Belgium), Prof. em. Dr. Susan E. Davies (USA), Bishop em. Duleep Kamil De Chickera (Sri Lanka), Caesar D'Mello (Australia), Jean-Marc Degrève (Belgium), Dr. Beat Dietschy (Switzerland), Rev. Jean-Claude Diez (Belgium), Prof. Dr. Timothy Reinhold Eberhart (USA), Ecolife Center (Tanzania), Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson (Canada/Hannover), Dr. Lionel Fernandes (India), Dr. Aruna Gnanadason (India), Julie Hague (Great Britain), Prof. Dr. Carlos Emilio Ham (Cuba), Rev. Dr. Anna Karin Hammar (Sweden), Rev. David Haslam (Great Britain), Canon Anthony Hawley (Great Britain), Fr. Karl Helmreich OSB (Austria), Prof. Dr. Yong-Bock Kim (South Korea), Prof. Dr. Mathew Koshy Punnackad (India), Prof. Dr. Jung Mo Sung (Brazil), Dr. Rogate R. Mshana (Tanzania), Ched Myers (USA), Kees Nieuwerth (Netherlands), Prof. Dr. Michael Northcott (Yogyakarta/Great Britain), Rev. Philip V. Peacock (India/Hannover), Rev. Dr. Praveen Perumalla (India), Barbara Rauchwarter (Austria), Tridib Reeves (India), Prof. Dr. Joerg Rieger (USA), Dr. Jiří Silný (Czech Republic), David Tootill (Great Britain), Prof. Dr. Stylianos Tsompanidis (Greece), Prof. Dr. Upolu Vaai (Fidji), Rev. Dr. Stiaan van der Merwe (South Africa), Alfons Vietmeier (Mexico), Antonella Visintin (Italy), Rev. Dr. Paul Wee (USA), Rev. Josef Purnama Widyatmadja (Indonesia), Dr. Stanley William (India), Prof. Dr. Lauri Emilio Wirth (Brazil) ...

from Germany: P. Dr. Jörg Alt SJ (Nürnberg), Dipl.-Theol. Alois Bauer (Bingen), Dr. Harald Bender (Nagold), Waltraud Bischoff (Rumbach), Gregor Böckermann (Frankfurt/M.), Dr. Ulrich Börngen (Stuttgart), Pfr. i.R. Dr. Markus Braun (Köln), Dr. Gerhard Breidenstein (Traunstein), Pfr. i.R. Dr. Martin Breidert (Bad Honnef), Bund der religiösen Sozialistinnen und Sozialisten Deutschlands e.V., Dr. Rudolf Buntzel (Berlin), Dr. Elisabeth Bücking (Sölden), Gerhard Dilschneider (Ulm), Dr. Bernhard Dinkelaker (Filderstadt), Pfr. i.R. Hartmut Dreier (Marl), Prof. Dr. Ulrich Duchrow (Heidelberg), Evangelische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kriegsdienstverweigerung und Frieden (Bonn), Br. Stefan Federbusch OFM (Hofheim), Dr. Hans-Jürgen Fischbeck (Berlin), Projektgruppe „Frauen wagen Frieden“ in der Evangelischen Kirche der Pfalz, Jan Gildemeister (Bonn), Pfr. Reinhard Hauff (Heiningen), Giselher Hickel (Berlin), Pfr. i.R. Martin Huhn (Mannheim), Institut für Theologie und Politik (Münster), Kairos Europa e.V., Pfr. i.R. Gerhard Köberlin (Hamburg), Sozialpfarrer i.R. Dr. Hans-Gerhard Koch (Nürnberg), Dr. Christoph Körner (Erlau), Sr. Beate Krug OSF (Zell a.M.), Bobby Langer (Würzburg), Pfr. i.R. Dr. Gerhard Liedke (Heidelberg), Pfr. i.R. Heiko Lietz (Schwerin), Dr. Julia Lis (Münster), Dr. Boniface Mabanza (Heidelberg), Christine Müller (Leipzig), Dr. Eberhard Müller (Zell a.H.), Ökumenische Initiative Reich Gottes – jetzt!, Ökumenisches Netz Rhein-Mosel-Saar, Prof. Dr. Gottfried Orth (Braunschweig), Pfr. Dr. Vincenzo Petracca (Heidelberg), Pro Ökumene – Initiative in Württemberg e.V. / der Vorstand, Pfr. i.R. Dr. Klaus Roeber (Berlin), Clemens Ronnefeldt (Freising), Prof. Dr. Gert Ruppel (Moers), Dr. Christian Schäfer-Neth (Kiel), Lic. theol. Peter Schönhöffer (Ingelheim), Prof. em. Dr. Franz Segbers (Konstanz), Solidarische Kirche im Rheinland, Kirchenrat i.R. Elu Vatter (Stuttgart), Pfr. i.R. Harald Wagner (Kortal), Dr. Klaus Wazlawik (Berlin), Werkstatt Ökonomie e.V. (Heidelberg), Prof. em. Dr. Renate Wind (Heidelberg), Pfr. i.R. Bernd Winkelmann (Leinefelde), Prof. Dr. Markus Wissen (Berlin) ...

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