

*Resources for*  
**THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY**  
*and throughout the year*

2024

You shall love  
the Lord your God ...  
and your neighbour as yourself

*(Luke 10:27)*

*Jointly prepared and published by*  
Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity  
Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches

# TO THOSE ORGANIZING THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

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## **The search for unity: throughout the year**

The traditional period in the northern hemisphere for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is 18-25 January. Those dates were proposed in 1908 by Paul Wattson to cover the days between the feasts of St Peter and St Paul, and therefore have a symbolic significance. In the southern hemisphere where January is a vacation time churches often find other days to celebrate the Week of Prayer, for example around Pentecost (suggested by the Faith and Order movement in 1926), which is also a symbolic date for the unity of the Church.

Mindful of the need for flexibility, we invite you to use this material throughout the whole year to express the degree of communion which the churches have already reached, and to pray together for that full unity which is Christ's will.

## **Adapting the text**

This material is offered with the understanding that, whenever possible, it will be adapted for use in local situations. Account should be taken of local liturgical and devotional practice, and of the whole social and cultural context. Such adaptation should ideally take place ecumenically. In some places ecumenical structures are already set up for adapting the material; in other places, we hope that the need to adapt it will be a stimulus to creating such structures.

## **Using the Week of Prayer material**

- For churches and Christian communities which observe the Week of Prayer together through a single common service, an order for an ecumenical worship service is provided.
- Churches and Christian communities may also incorporate material from the Week of Prayer into their own services. Prayers from the ecumenical worship service, the "eight days", and the selection of additional prayers can be used as appropriate in their own setting.
- Communities which observe the Week of Prayer in their worship for each day during the week may draw material for these services from the "eight days".
- Those wishing to undertake bible studies on the Week of Prayer theme can use as a basis the biblical texts and reflections given in the eight days. Each day the discussions, which this year includes a challenge, can lead to a closing period of intercessory prayer.
- Those who wish to pray privately may find the material helpful for focusing their prayer intentions. They can be mindful that they are in communion with others praying all around the world for the greater visible unity of Christ's Church.

# BIBLICAL TEXT FOR 2024

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## *Luke 10:25-37*

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher”, he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live”.

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend’. Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy”. Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise”.

New Revised Standard Version

# INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME OF THE YEAR 2024

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## **“You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbour as yourself”**

*(Luke 10:27)*

The materials for the 2024 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity were prepared by an ecumenical team from Burkina Faso facilitated by the local *Chemin Neuf* Community (CCN)<sup>1</sup>. The theme chosen is “You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbour as yourself” (Lk 10:27). Brothers and sisters from the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, Protestant Churches, ecumenical bodies and the CCN in Burkina Faso collaborated generously in drafting the prayers and reflections and experienced their work together as a real path of ecumenical conversion.

### **Loving God and neighbour in the midst of a security crisis**

Burkina Faso is located in West Africa in the Sahel region, which includes the neighbouring countries of Mali and Niger. It covers 174,000 km<sup>2</sup> and has 21 million inhabitants, of about sixty ethnicities. In religious terms, approximately 64% of the population is Muslim, 9% adheres to traditional African religions and 26% is Christian (20% Catholic, 6% Protestant). These three religious groups are present in every region of the country, and in virtually every family.

Burkina Faso is currently experiencing a serious security crisis, which affects all the communities of faith. After a major jihadist attack was mounted from outside the country in 2016, the security situation in Burkina Faso, and consequently its social cohesion, deteriorated dramatically. The country has endured a proliferation of terrorist attacks, lawlessness and human trafficking. This has left over three thousand dead and almost two million internally displaced persons in the country. Thousands of schools, health centres and town halls have been closed, and much of the socio-economic and transport infrastructure has been destroyed. Attacks targeting specific ethnic groups exacerbate the risk of inter-communal conflicts. In the context of this dire security situation, social cohesion, peace and national unity are being undermined.

Christian churches have been expressly targeted by armed attacks. Priests, pastors and catechists have been killed during worship and the fate of others who were kidnapped remains unknown. At the time of writing, more than 22% of the national territory is outside the control of the state. Christians can no longer openly practice their faith in these areas. Because of terrorism, the majority of Christian churches in the north, east and north-west of the country have been closed. There is no longer any public Christian worship in many of these areas. Where worship is still possible, with police protection, usually in large cities, it has been necessary to shorten services owing to security concerns.

It must be recognised that despite the efforts of both the state and religious communities, the country is becoming increasingly unstable as extremist groups become more widespread. Nevertheless, a degree of solidarity is emerging between the Christian, Muslim and traditional religions. Their leaders are working to find lasting solutions for peace, social cohesion and

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1. Further information about CCN can be found in Appendix 3.

reconciliation. To this end, for instance, the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Burkina-Niger is making a major effort to support inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation.

Following the government's calls for prayers for peace, social cohesion and reconciliation, individual churches continue to organise daily prayers and fasting. Action by the various Catholic and Protestant churches has intensified to assist displaced persons. Reflection and awareness-raising meetings have been organized to promote better understanding of the situation and of the value of fraternity, and to develop strategies for a return to lasting peace. This hope is also reflected in the traditional Mossi<sup>2</sup> proverb: "No matter the nature or duration of the fight, the moment of reconciliation will come."

The invitation to work together on the texts for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2024 challenges the different churches in Burkina Faso to walk, pray and work together in mutual love during this difficult period for their country. The love of Christ that unites all Christians is stronger than their divisions and the Christians of Burkina Faso commit themselves to walking the path of love of God and love of neighbour. They are confident that God's love will overcome the violence that currently afflicts their country.

## **The Biblical Text**

### **The centrality of love in Christian life**

Love is the 'DNA' of Christian faith. God is Love and "the love of Christ has gathered us into one".<sup>3</sup> We find our common identity in the experience of God's love (cf. Jn 3:16) and reveal that identity to the world by how we love one another (Jn 13:35). In the passage selected for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2024 (Lk 10:25-37), Jesus reaffirmed the traditional Jewish teaching from Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might"; and Leviticus 19:18b, "you shall love your neighbour as yourself".

The lawyer in the gospel passage immediately asks Jesus, "and who is my neighbour?" The question of how far the biblical obligation to love should reach was a disputed one among doctors of the law. Traditionally, this obligation was believed to extend to fellow Israelites and resident aliens. Later, with the impact of invasions by foreign powers, the commandment came to be understood as not applying to foreigners from occupying forces. In time, as Judaism itself fragmented, it was sometimes understood to apply only to one's own particular faction. The question asked of Jesus by the lawyer is therefore a provocative one. Jesus responds to the question with a parable illustrating love extending far beyond the limits expected by the lawyer.

Many early Christian writers such as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom and Augustine saw the trajectory of God's plan for the salvation of the world in this parable. They saw the man coming down from Jerusalem as an image of Adam – *ie* all humanity – coming down from paradise to this world, with all its dangers and brokenness, and the robbers as an image of the hostile earthly powers that assail us. They saw Christ himself as the one who, moved by compassion, came to the aid of the half-dead man, treated his wounds and brought him to the safety of an inn, which they saw as an image of the Church. The Samaritan's promise to return was seen as foreshadowing the Lord's promise to come again.

Christians are called to act like Christ in loving like the Good Samaritan, showing mercy and compassion to those in need, regardless of their religious, ethnic or social identity. It is not shared identities that should prompt us to come to the aid of the other, but love of our 'neighbour'. However, the vision of love of neighbour that Jesus puts before us is under strain in the world

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2. The Mossi people are the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso.

3. *Ubi caritas* (attrib. Paulinus of Aquileia).

today. Wars in many regions, imbalances in international relations and inequalities generated by structural adjustments imposed by western powers or other external agencies all inhibit our capacity to love like Christ. It is by learning to love one another regardless of our differences that Christians can become neighbours like the Samaritan in the Gospel.

### **The Way of Ecumenism**

Jesus prayed that his followers would all be one (cf. *Jn 17:21*), and so Christians cannot lose hope or stop praying and working for unity. They are united by their love of God in Christ and by the experience of knowing God's love for them. They recognise this faith experience in one another when they pray, worship and serve God together. However, in inter-church relations, including in Burkina Faso, this remains a challenge. Lack of mutual knowledge between churches and suspicion of one another can weaken commitment to the way of ecumenism. Some can be anxious that ecumenism may lead to a loss of denominational identity and prevent church 'growth'. Such rivalry between churches is counter to the prayer of Jesus. Like the priest and the Levite in the gospel passage, Christians often miss the opportunity to connect with brothers and sisters because of fear. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we ask the Lord to come to our assistance, to tend our wounds and so enable us to walk the way of ecumenism with confidence and hope.<sup>4</sup>

### **Christian unity in the service of wider peace and reconciliation**

The specific context of Burkina Faso reflects the need to place love at the centre of the quest for peace and reconciliation. This search has often been undermined by the loss of values and of a shared sense of humanity and by a diminished concern for the common good, probity, integrity and patriotism. The search for reconciliation has also been weakened by spiritual impoverishment and by the pursuit of easy gains. Faced with these realities, the imperative to witness to the love of God is all the more pressing.

### **Moving from division to unity in Burkina Faso**

Christian communities in Burkina Faso try to live the call to love through mutual hospitality. This is particularly evident during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. They have committed both human and financial resources to translating the ecumenical French text of the Bible (*Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible*) into local languages, thus helping to lead Christians to the 'inn' of the Word of God (cf. *Lk 10:34*). In addition, they visit each other's churches and share in worship. They also cooperate in the promotion of human fraternity, peace and security in Burkina Faso. They bring Christ to their brothers and sisters when they tend the wounds of those who fall into the grip of poverty and hardship.

However, as an African proverb says, "The tree must not hide the forest". These positive ecumenical examples cannot disguise the fact that there remain many challenges to unity. Despite their efforts to be the neighbour of all who confess the Triune God, the churches of Burkina Faso struggle to truly love each other as Christ commands. They sometimes relate to each other like Samaritans and Jews, divided culturally and theologically and living in unfriendly or hostile relationships. Continued disunity disfigures them and they acknowledge the need for ecumenical conversion, so that they can pour the oil and wine of healing on each other's wounds.

The inn in the parable of the Good Samaritan was frequently interpreted by Church Fathers as an image of the Church. Just as the Samaritan brought the wounded man to the inn, so Christ entrusts the world's wounded and needy to our churches, to tend their brokenness and help restore them to health. This mission in service of the world is also the pathway towards the unity which is God's gift for God's people.

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4. For information about how churches in Burkina Faso are working together, see Appendix 2.

# THE PREPARATION OF THE MATERIAL FOR THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2024

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The international team appointed jointly by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to review and finalise the materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2024 met in Rome from 25 to 29 September 2022. The meeting took place at Casa San Giuseppe di Cluny, which, since 2016, has been administered by the *Chemin Neuf* Community, whose members make a special commitment to Christian unity.

The drafting of the materials had been entrusted by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity to an ecumenical team from Burkina Faso, coordinated by the *Chemin Neuf* Community in that country. Ecumenical openness and cooperation have not always been strong in Burkina Faso, but representatives from the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, Protestant Churches and ecumenical bodies accepted the invitation willingly and collaborated generously in drafting the prayers and reflections. The political and social situation in Burkina Faso is unstable and there are many threats to peace and social cohesion. Preparation of the texts for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity during such a precarious period in their country's history helped the ecumenical drafting group to recognise that the love of Christ unites all Christians and is stronger than their divisions. At the end of the work, they recognised that working together in this way had been a real experience of ecumenical conversion for them.

Unfortunately, the four members of the local group who were expected to take part in the meeting in Rome were unable to attend in person, owing to a last-minute strike by air traffic controllers. However, they participated in the meeting remotely. The meeting was chaired jointly by Revd Dr Mikie Roberts of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and Revd Anthony Currer of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome.

## **Members of the international group:**

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Revd Peter Colwell	Churches Together in Britain & Ireland (London)
Revd Anthony Currer	Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity (Rome)
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