



CHRISTIANITY MATTERS

*Address to the 11th Forum of the National Council of Churches in Australia
21 June 2024*

Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay
WCC General Secretary

Sisters and brothers, companions in our ecumenical pilgrimage, I am honored by your invitation to participate in the NCCA 11th Forum. I am pleased to share with you some of my thoughts on the theme you have chosen Christianity Matters.

I wish particularly to thank your NCCA President, the Reverend John Gilmore, and your General Secretary, Ms. Elizabeth Stone, for the invitation to contribute to your triennial forum. This occasion is especially meaningful for me as you deliberate on how best, in true ecumenical spirit, to convey messages of genuine, realistic hope in these seemingly hope-starved times. Further, you seek to envision ecumenical, collaborative ways and means of nurturing that hope in your communities of faith and among the larger public.

Perhaps I can best contribute by evoking our broadest context in the world and in the churches, then zeroing in on the ecumenical contribution—of which you are a vital part. Finally, I will indicate some recent learnings that might also inform or inspire your own collaborations to work for positive change in the Australian context.

We live in a time when faith is in crisis. A time in which many people do not see the necessity to believe in God or even if they do, they don't seem to practice their faith in meaningful and devoted ways. This is perhaps because of disillusionment, inability to understand God and what is happening in the world today, or a pure sense of disbelief and attractions to the rising secularization of society and growing atheism. Social scientists have for long predicted that we are heading into a religion less age, but they are wrong. Research tells us today that some people are not interested in religion per se, but they focus on God and spirituality. They are given to more eastern forms of spiritualities that stress mystical experiences and out of body encounters to cope with the challenges of life.

In such a context Christianity matter. However, we need to ask a new set of questions to be relevant, provide meaning and answers to pressing questions and needs. Without changing the substance of our faith, we must engage new styles and ways of reaching people with the gospel of Christ, especially the young people. We are so wrong when we think that young people are not interested in

God. Again, research shows us that they are not interested in the Church or organised religion per se, but they are certainly keen about God. I look at my own children and see a depth of spirituality that I did not have even though I went to church every Sunday and most weekdays. My view was an absolute and unquestionable devotion to form and practice of faith, this is what you did if you believed in God in the time I was growing up. But today most young people seek critical engagement with reality and God.

Albert Einstein's secretary once asked him why he always asked the same questions. To which he replied, "because I have new answers.". This is something Christian leaders have to think about seriously. Why? Because Christianity matters. So, let us now ask the question, "Why does Christianity matter?"

Gospel of Salvation and Grace

We believe that Jesus is the answer to sin and salvation. We believe that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. We believe that the wages of sin is death but the gift of God, in Christ Jesus, is eternal life. We believe that Jesus is good news for the world. Much of our problem today is that Christians do not believe this message. The messenger's heart is not in the message. Just like the prophet Jonah who preached to Nineveh but wished they would not be saved, But God worked God's miracle in Nineveh in spite of Jonah's reluctance. The reluctant and reticent church often dances with a feeble, weak and too accommodating and compromising message in order to be accepted rather than proclaim with boldness and truth the message about the saving grace of Jesus Christ to the world. A message that tells us that Christ(ianity) matters.

Maybe some of us may not be too convinced about this theological or biblical approach to saying why Christianity matters today. Well, if we are not to look at the Word only then let us look at the world and find some answers there.

Our Context: All Creation Is Groaning

As you know, we are living in very difficult times. The current global context has been described as a "poly-crisis". Multiple threats — such as accelerating climate change, COVID-19 and its impacts, injustices, poverty, diseases and health challenges, conflicts and wars, unprecedented levels of forced displacement, migration, increasing hunger and food insecurity, rising inequality and marginalization, and widespread economic instability among others — are converging in complex inter-relationships. The WCC 11th Assembly captured this well:

"We live and witness in a world which is at the same time God's beautiful creation and broken by ecological crisis, war, pandemic, systemic poverty, racism, gender-based violence, human rights violations, and many other sufferings".

The largest context and most pressing challenge for today's ecumenical movement is the state of the *oikoumene*, the "whole inhabited world." Today we live in difficult, even perilous, times, a time of crisis. Our current global context has been described by our most recent assembly as a "polycrisis." Five immense crises are, in our day, converging:

(1) *Accelerating climate change* threatens lives and livelihoods, wreaking havoc and even causing the extinction of species.

(2) *Increasing economic inequality*, the result of an unjust economic order, has left billions in poverty and stifled progress toward food security and global healthcare.

(3) We are also witnessing *a worldwide recession from the longheld consensus about human rights*, threatening the dignity and legal status of religious and ethnic and sexual minorities.

(4) Likewise, we are recently undergoing *a crisis of governance*, through a retreat from and paralysis of democratic institutions, an advance of authoritarian regimes, the impotence of our international institutions to secure peace and well-being, the rise of mis- and disinformation in politics and media, stoking societal tensions and xenophobia.

(5) And finally and most painfully, we are experiencing widespread and frequent *outbreaks of violence within countries and war between them*.

Today's terrible and unnecessary wars are symptomatic of the whole polycrisis. We all know about Ukraine and Russia, and, since 7 October, the war between Israel and Hamas (a conflict with roots that go back to 1967 and even 1948). But there are dozens more wars and conflicts going on that don't get much coverage.

These global trends, each of which engenders incalculable human suffering, are the broadest context in which Christians and Christian churches are living their ecumenical fellowship today. Their scale is global, their peril imminent, their solutions uncertain. They threaten the integrity of life on earth as we know it. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:22-24, "the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains."

Here in Australia, you know these converging dangers all too well. The terrible fires of recent years are surely the most dramatic sign of the human and environmental costs of our way of life. Moreover, they demonstrate the confluence of ills, when women and children have been 14 times more likely to die in climate disasters. Apart from climate change you face, just like the rest of the world, challenges in education, health, domestic violence, the economy, terrorism and national security, dysfunction in politics, refugees and asylum seekers, immigration, indigenous Peoples' rights, Disability rights, Youth justice, Older Peoples rights and freedom of expression. The Australian annual Youth Survey reveals that the biggest issues for young people are the environment, equity and discrimination, the economy and mental health.

In such a global and local context, we ask why Christianity matters. Allow me to offer some answers. The WCC speaks of a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation and Unity. A pilgrimage is an invitation, a direction and a methodology. As Christians we are people of the way, we are also on the way. We are on a journey together, trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us and expecting God to surprise us. I would like to use this idea of a pilgrimage as a basis to answer this question, Why Christianity matters? So it is an ecumenical response.

PROCLAIM JUSTICE

The cry for freedom and justice is loud for many in the world today. We are surrounded by the need for economic, gender and climate justice. God uses a number of instruments to reach and transform the world, including and especially the church. Therefore, the church needs to hear and respond to this painful cry. The mission of the church is to follow in the footsteps of proclaiming Christ's love to the world. The church needs to stand where God stands and not get mixed up with the rich and powerful. The language of love is best expressed in standing up for truth, siding with the poor and holding out hope in the midst of injustices and sufferings.

The God portrayed in Scripture is the "lover of justice": He calls us to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with him" (Micah 6:8). The task of the Church is to maintain a consistent prophetic voice against injustices. In the face of unjust economic systems, increasing poverty, unnecessary wars, ethnic and racial violence we need to say enough is enough. Our cry for justice must be loud, clear and prophetic. However, to do this well we need to first address injustices in the church - economic, gender, youth, digital and ecological injustices. The God of justice calls us to stand up for justice and to live justly and to love mercy. Where is mercy when thousands of people are killed in Palestine, Ukraine, Sudan and other parts of the world? Where is justice when thousands of people go to bed hungry every night? Where is justice when thousands of people are denied access to humanitarian aid? Where is justice when hundreds of migrants drown or die while fleeing their countries? Where is justice when human rights and dignity are denied, deprived and violated? Where is justice when indigenous people are denied of their rights, land and history? Where is justice when old people are forgotten, and young people not given space to express themselves?

The God of justice and mercy calls us to stand up for justice. We cannot be silent. Christians need to stand up for justice and we need to stand *together*. In unity is our strength. We are better and stronger together. Together we can shout. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Together we can make a difference in the world. Together we can live and fulfil God's vision for the world. Together we can say Christianity matters.

Love and Reconciliation

Christianity matters because it is a gospel of love and reconciliation. With all the suffering and pain in the world today, what the world needs is love. Properly understood and if practiced well the Christian faith is the message of love. John 3:16 tells us that "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." God is love and those who love God must love others (1John 3:11-15). We live in a world full of hatred, we hear hate speeches and witness racial and ethnic conflicts in so many different places.

There is so much of brokenness, pain and sufferings in the world. What is the message of the Church in such a context? How do we work towards healing, forgiveness and reconciliation?

The Genesis story of the Fall (Genesis 3) tells us that sin separated us from God and left us with doom, destruction, and death. There was no way out. There was absolutely nothing that humans could do to redeem ourselves, save ourselves, and get back into a reconciled relationship with God. The great news is that God's love refused to leave us there. Instead, God sent his only begotten Son to come into the world to suffer and die for the world, and through his death and resurrection, Jesus saved, forgave, and reconciled us to the Father and to one another, breaking down the walls of hostility and giving us peace.

Consequently, we are reconciled to the Father. God's forgiveness is all about love. Suffering love! Forgiving love! Reconciling love! We cannot say that we love God and hate our brothers and sisters. The love of God forgives us and prompts us to forgive others and to embrace others who are different from us.

In the South African experience after apartheid, there was the call for forgiveness and reconciliation. The ability of those who have been wronged to forgive their oppressors and offenders is no easy task. Forgiveness is complex. The process of forgiveness is recognising that we cannot change the event itself, but we can change the meaning we give to the event. Thus, victims are often unwilling to let go of the emotional tags associated with the hurt, bitterness, vengefulness, and hatred toward the perpetrators.

Yet, many South Africans did ask for forgiveness, and many others forgave those who violated their rights and human dignity. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) with its many failures in meeting its full objectives still provided a facility to help people to face their oppressors and to find healing and forgiveness. Many churches appeared before the TRC and confessed to their own complicity, silence, and part in promoting apartheid in South Africa. It is apparent that forgiveness is important to find reconciliation and healing.

In the quest for reconciliation and unity, forgiveness becomes an essential point of departure. Forgiveness is an important part of reconciliation. You can forgive someone and still refuse to be reconciled with them; but to seek reconciliation, forgiveness is necessary.

I am sure that here in the context of Australia, you can think of experiences of hatred, ethnic and racial divisions. Places where people have been and still are hurt. There is a need for forgiveness, healing, reconciliation and love. Christians can and must play a significant role in spreading love. The WCC theme at its last Assembly in 2022 was: "Christ's love moves us to reconciliation and unity."

Following the example of Christ's love, churches ought to help people to be brought into spaces to forgive, be forgiven, and seek reconciliation. The love of Christ reconciles a lost and broken world, not only to God but to the whole creational order which is renewed by the sacrifice of Christ. The doctrine of reconciliation is a prominent theme in the New Testament, and the theological essence of the concept is expressed in 2Corinthians 5, which reads:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation; the old has gone the new has come! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God! (vv.17-21).

In this sense, reconciliation is God's gift to not only to reconcile fallen humankind with Godself, but also with all humanity and creation.

The church as a reconciled community must display unity, justice, peace and love. The church should not perpetuate human divisions on race, ethnicity, gender, etc. Instead, it ought to strive towards reconciliation and unity. If this is the case, then the church needs to articulate reconciliation and unity within its own life and witness so that the world may know the love of Christ. The church must work towards the renewal of all relationships and the restoration of human relationships with creation. As reconciled people, they have to be the proponents of ecological concerns and the precursors of the restoration of the integrity of creation. Christians are called to do good to all people and to love the

enemy. They are to be the promoters of peace in society and agents in the formation of a new humanity. The church is called to constantly work towards forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity, bearing in mind its agency in transforming society so that all may have the fullness of life. Forgiveness ought to set the social condition for the process of reconciliation to restore and heal not only interpersonal relationships but also constructively rebalance the political, legal, and economic injustices toward preventing the prospect of renewed conflict.

The WCC has over the years maintained the biblical imperative of reconciliation and unity to heal and restore a broken world. The love of Christ ought to move churches into visible unity, spiritual and social transformation, and justice. Programmes such as combatting racism, justice, peace, and integrity of creation, and in last few years, the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, have all indicated the WCC's endeavour to strive for reconciliation and unity in the world, starting with churches as co-pilgrims on the journey. And you as churches in Australia have joined us on this journey. But the journey must continue.

I think it fair to say that at the WCC Assembly in 2022, with its emphasis on the love of Christ and its fruits in justice, reconciliation, and unity, the assembly really nurtured “an ecumenism of the heart.” Love, our self-surrender to God in faith and our self-giving to our sisters and brothers in solidarity, is now firmly in the centre of our whole ecumenical endeavour. A deepening, global ecumenical spirituality was voiced in Karlsruhe in more Christocentric tones. As the Unity Statement adopted there proclaimed, “In a world like this, wounded by divisions, the churches are called to witness to the indestructible power of love to bring together and reconcile. Through the faith they proclaim in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the churches are called to bear a counter-cultural witness: the hope of unity, justice, and peace.”

The centrality of love, and our faith in its power to transform the world, was reaffirmed in the assembly's closing message, entitled “A Call to Act Together”: “We will find a strength to act from a unity founded in Christ's love, for it enables us to learn the things that make for peace, to transform division into reconciliation, and to work for the healing of our living planet,” and indeed all creation.

PEACE

Christianity matters because it is a gospel of peace. We have already mentioned that we live in very troubled times of raging violence, conflicts and wars. There seems to be no peace. Political leaders and countries believe that they can find solutions through violence. They are so mistaken. The WCC speaks against violence and calls for dialogue to resolve problems and conflicts.

The WCC has over the years worked for peace in the world. We spend a great amount of time, energy and money to work for peace. I went to Ukraine and Russia, to Israel and Palestine, Sudan and recently to Colombia where we engaged with church leaders, politicians, presidents and other groups trying to work for peace. It is no easy task. Even churches express different views, we are too caught up in religious nationalism, often used as instruments of states and politicians whether rightly or not, that is not the matter. The truth is that if we are to truly follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace, then we must be peacemakers, peace-builders and peace-keepers. I have seen how churches are in disunity and discord with one another because they are influenced by politics rather than their faith. Admittedly, it is difficult to not be influenced by the realities and experiences of our times. But how can we allow God's Word and Spirit to speak to us and to use us as Christians as instruments of justice, peace and reconciliation that leads us to unity? Christianity matters, because our Lord calls us to proclaim peace

to the world. Yet there can be no peace without justice. Christians are called to work for just peace in the world.

Where are those places in your country that you must work for peace? We must choose to follow Christ rather than our own preferences, prejudices and pride. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Matthew 5:9).

As our partners in the Pilgrimage, your fulsome commitments in the NCCA to racial justice for First Nations peoples, action for peace, aiding asylum seekers, and safe churches attest to your responsible discipleship for our times. I believe that one concrete means of increasing the NCCA's impact is through expanding and deepening our NCCA-WCC partnerships, such as we presently have in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel.

HOPE

Christianity matters because we are a people of hope. Amidst struggle, sufferings and strife, we live in resurrection hope. In the anticipation that all will be well. That justice will come. That love will prevail. That peace will come. That we will be one in Christ in unity. Hope is an eschatological gift for the future but with the resurrection of Jesus, hope breaks into the present. Therefore, we keep hoping but hope is not passive resignation leaving it all to God, it is working with God as instruments to bring in God's kingdom of justice, righteousness, love and peace. Hope does not disappoint us for God pours out his Spirit into our hearts.

The Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity reframes our historic commitments—to unity, public witness, and service—to meet head on the existential challenges we face today. This sacred journey, in which churches around the world take up the concrete work of justice and peace, will direct and embody the life, witness, and programmatic work of the council over the next eight years. It evokes and supports a theology of accompaniment that extends the reach and effectiveness of our ecumenical community, our public commitments, and our collaboration in service. We want to show up where you are. We want to walk and work and pray with you, to learn from you and be present everywhere that there is evident need. As an organization, the WCC may not have the most financial resources, but through our fellowship we have access to the knowledge and creativity, dedication and faith of Christians around the world.

In our Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity, we unite our worldwide fellowship of churches not only around our shared Christian faith, which remains our vital centre, but also in the specific interests of justice, love, peace, and hope. That is faith's imperative and our clear vocation.

A Christianity that matters must be guided by spirituality, renewal, impact and relevance. We must address the numerous challenges in the world, country and context. Christians must work for justice, love and peace as we proclaim the message of saving grace in the Jesus Christ to a broken and suffering world. Vital Christianity must speak of transformative discipleship, theological renewal, reforming churches, technological and digital integration if we want to reach young people, inspiring worship, relevant liturgy, interreligious dialogue and cooperation, decolonial imperatives, and Christian unity.

Let me emphasise that Unity is indispensable: As we address the various conflicts and crises in the world, it is important for churches to seek unity and to work together. Apart from the fact that Jesus prayed for the unity of Christians so that the world may believe, global challenges warrant that we work together to heal, reconcile, and restore creation. The Christian voice for unity is not restricted to the church but to the unity of all humankind and indeed the unity of all creation. In this respect, unity and justice go together as two sides of a coin. For seventy-seven years, the vision of the WCC has been expressed as a commitment to *stay together, pray together, move together, and act together* as a fellowship of churches seeking visible unity and common witness. In its “Unity Statement,” the 11th Assembly invited the churches to continue that unity:

We affirm the vision of the WCC for the visible unity of all Christians, and we invite other Christians to share this vision with us. We also invite all people of faith and goodwill to trust, with us, that a different world, a world respectful of the living earth, a world in which everyone has daily bread and life in abundance, a decolonized world, a more loving, harmonious, just, and peaceful world, is possible. In a world weighed down with so much pain, anguish, and fear, we believe that the love we have seen in Christ brings the liberating possibilities of joy, justice for all, and peace with the earth. Moved by the Holy Spirit, compelled by a vision of unity, we journey on together, resolved to practice Christ's love, following his steps as his disciples, and carrying a torch for love in the world, trusting in the promise that Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.

It is clear from this statement that Christian unity is needed to witness to and transform the world as we address conflicts, divisions, brokenness, and pain. Christian disunity is nothing but a feeble, weak, and contradictory message to an already fragmented world, while genuine Christian unity is a sign of hope to the world and a vocal testament to the power of love to heal, to reconcile, and to bring peace.

Concluding Remarks

As we have noted, many and diverse challenges confront the world right now. Our polycrisis was captured well by the assembly's message: “We live and witness in a world which is at the same time God's beautiful creation and broken by ecological crisis, war, pandemic, systemic poverty, racism, gender-based violence, human rights violations, and many other sufferings.”

But this crisis also renders it an opportune time for Christians, Christian churches and councils such as the NCCA and the WCC to help ensure human life, dignity, and well-being and to promote an alternative, more sustainable lifestyle in and among the churches and throughout the world. *Crucially, we can mobilize the world into seeing there are other ways.* The *hope* that we find in the love of God and in the Resurrected Lord of Life can counter our temptation to disillusion and despair. Based on this hope, our public witness and advocacy for peace, justice, and reconciliation present a moral compass and call to conscience for the world. They demonstrate to everyone that life and love will triumph

over death and greed. Embodying hope, these are the ways of peace, the ways of righteousness, the ways of living together as human beings sharing the same planet and serving each other as we serve God in the world. As our Strategic Plan 2023-2030 puts it:

Faith communities remain a strong hope for promoting metanoia (transformation) in the hearts, minds and actions of people and communities that the world so urgently needs. Faith communities engaged in humanitarian work and trauma transformation are signs of hope. This is evident in the increasing mobilization of young people and of people of faith against the many pressing threats to sustainable and inclusive communities.

As you examine your already robust collaborative programmes, I hope that what I have shared with you today will prove helpful. At its core, ours is a global crisis in spiritual values, but ours is also an age of deep spiritual longing. Our ecumenical future lies in working with you, accompanying you, as our fellow disciples of Christ, to nurture among people and publics the personal faith and courage, the communal commitment, and the public willingness to pursue and effectuate the transformational changes our situation requires for the well-being, indeed the survival, of humankind. Let us embrace that challenge, each other, and a transformed future that awaits us as we work for God's New Creation. Let us know that Christianity matters as we believe, live, act and proclaim Christ to the world, and you here in Australia. Let us rely on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to encourage our faith and make a difference in the world so that the world may know the grace and love of Christ.