

The Arusha Call to Discipleship (2018)

A Report from The Arusha Conference

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The Arusha Conference: An Introduction

The World Council of Churches' Conference on World Mission and Evangelism met in Arusha, Tanzania, March 8-13, 2018. More than one thousand participants gathered, most of them engaged in mission and evangelism, coming from different Christian traditions and from every part of the world. The topic was "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship".

The conference had four characteristics: It was a mission conference following in the long tradition of the International Mission Council (IMC) and the WCC Commission on World Mission (CWME)² of holding mission conferences roughly every decade. Previous conferences have been held in 1928 in Jerusalem. The last one was in Athens in 2005. Also, Edinburgh 2010 is reckoned as one of the mission conferences.

Secondly, it was an ecumenical conference with representatives from mainline Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, evangelical, Pentecostal and African Instituted churches. I was the only Lausanne representative. Ecumenical also implies efforts to engage the delegates in an open and honest dialogue, celebrating the unity of the churches and the unity between church and mission.

Thirdly, it was an African conference – the first such conference in Africa since 1958 in Achimota, Ghana; with the spirit

of African rhythms, music and art and clearly attending to African signs of the times. A significant number of speakers were African.

And fourthly, it was a young mission leaders' conference with more than 100 young students, scholars, and church leaders participating in the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute programme (GETI), which met prior to and then joined the conference. The strong participation of youth and of women was innovative and played an important role during the conference.

The first part of the conference theme (Moving in the Spirit) was a reference to Galatians 5:25 – "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit". It meant discernment of the signs of the times, and it referred to the WCC notion of pilgrimage – Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace, chosen as a theme since the WCC general assembly in Busan in 2013. This expression was used abundantly from the platform.

The second part of the theme calls to transforming discipleship – called to a life that transforms the very notion of discipleship, called to be disciples who are constantly open to being transformed, and called to be disciples who are transforming, working together towards life, living out the values of the kingdom of God, and engaging in mission from the margins. Some of these themes were lifted up during the morning Bible studies – in

some ways the more substantial part of the programme.

There were five main plenaries on the following themes: Celebrating and Lamenting, Following Jesus: Becoming Disciples, Becoming Disciples: Transforming the World, Transforming the World: Equipping Disciples, Equipped Disciples: Embracing the Cross. The plenaries were very well prepared and included some excellent key note speakers and panels, all of it coloured by African singing, performance and drums.

In addition, there were a huge number of workshops (*warsha* in Kiswahili) over four days, and there was a daily community marketplace (*sokoni* in Kiswahili) where people could gather in the late afternoon and deliberate on such issues as youth, women, and the margins.

The conference adopted 'The Arusha Call to Discipleship' which is found attached in its present form – it may be further edited and will be followed up by a theological document on key issues and eventually a full report from all the conference activities.

General reflections

The conference reflected great varieties culturally and geographically. At the same time there was a strong tendency to use a similar ecumenical jargon of words, concepts and expressions which kept emerging especially from the platform in speeches and panels.

The extent of this jargon sometimes hindered real communication: One knew at the beginning of a speech what would follow; so why listen? This uniformity may reflect unity among churches and participants but may also be a risk as far as expressing different views and opinions. A case in point is the Busan-expression 'pilgrimage of peace and justice', which was repeated in almost all contributions.

In one way a meaningful concept, but also risky when it becomes jargon. I am aware that also other Christian groups, like Catholics and Lausanne, may have their specific jargon and tribal language. What I miss is here a more biblically oriented language, with more substance and vigour. Any jargon may become a smoke screen for genuine differences, and it may result in some people feeling excluded since they cannot identify with language and culture.

As an ecumenical-evangelical for decades I must admit that I sometimes felt excluded by the jargon: Marginalised, justice and peace, pilgrimage, global financial system, transformation, empowerment – but little about personal sin, evil powers/spirits, conversion, cheap and costly grace. Thus, Bonhoeffer's *Costly Discipleship* was not really on the table in a conference about discipleship.

Although there was a unity of accepted ecumenical language from the platform there were, however, discussions at table groups, in *Warshas* and more informally that were challenging this, wanting to talk about sin and personal discipleship etc. This challenge also began to show its head during the debate on the Arusha Call – particularly from African and Orthodox participants.

Theological reflections

Some hold the opinion that the conference was arranged primarily to consolidate and less to be a platform for new innovations. As such, the conference achieved its purpose. Another perspective is the focus on the marginalized; this is not new, but one may wonder whether most of us have really heard what mission and evangelism from below, from the little ones, imply. Maybe the conference here has served to teach us a lesson?

The Arusha Call to Discipleship includes some essential elements, like conversion and sin and a sentence about those who have not heard the good news yet; in my view this could have been clearer and more explicit.

The conference kept talking about the cross, but very little about the cross of Christ. The only one who during a final plenary lifted up the cross of Jesus was the Catholic bishop Brian Farrell. I tried to recommend the inclusion in the Arusha Call of a sentence: “I believe in the cross where Christ died for our sins”, but it was not included. This is in my view a serious omission and points to the underlying issue of the uniqueness of Christ.

In some ways I felt at home in the conference. I think there is growing convergence on such key issues as mission Dei, the Kingdom of God as a common goal of mission, the holistic understanding and practice of mission (integral mission as it is called in *The Cape Town Commitment*), contextualization as a joint and common theological task. On these issues we generally agree.

But I still lack a recognition of

- the uniqueness of Christ and of the lostness of humans (salvation and damnation as the two exits of life),
- confidence in the truth,
- relevance and power of the gospel,
- a sense of urgency about evangelism (my humble proposal to include a sentence about those who had not yet heard the gospel in The Arusha Call, was, however, acknowledged as evidenced in the attached document, but no one else spoke about the unreached / unengaged),

- and a stronger focus on personal experience of Jesus Christ.

I was disappointed over the very weak Lausanne participation. Mark Oxbrow from Faith2Share and I were to my knowledge the only clear Lausanne representatives, with me as the only acknowledged Lausanne person. When I requested an opportunity to bring a greeting from Lausanne, my request was turned down for ‘pragmatic’ reasons. A stronger Lausanne participation would have allowed the evangelical voice to be better heard.

Let me be blunt: I met with many good and well-meaning people, I enjoyed some good input from plenaries and workshops, I was happy with Bible studies and spirituality, but I honestly did not learn much new about God’s mission.

Some evangelicals found a helpful critique of the alignment between power and discipleship which we see in an increasing number of global contexts and the neglect of the biblical bias towards the poor and the marginalised. Evangelicals (and sections of the Eastern Orthodox) particularly need to be challenged on this issue – and this includes Lausanne itself. There were occasional conversations about the politicisation of faith in Latin America, the power of the Christian Right in the USA and the growth of prosperity gospel in Africa.

We may also want evangelical communities around the world to do better in terms of confronting the marginalisation of the disabled, youth, the LGBT community etc. WCC and CWME are strong on this, and we could learn from them.

Appendix:

13 March 2018

World Council of Churches' Conference on World Mission and Evangelism
Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

The Arusha Call to Discipleship³

The World Council of Churches' Conference on World Mission and Evangelism met in Arusha, Tanzania, from 8-13 March 2018. More than one thousand participants—all of whom are engaged in mission and evangelism—gathered from many different Christian traditions and from every part of the world.

We joyfully celebrated the life-giving movement of the Spirit of God in our time, drawing particular inspiration from African contexts and spiritualities. Through Bible study, common prayer and worship, and by sharing our stories together, we were encouraged to be witnesses to the reign of God that has come to us through the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Despite some glimmers of hope, we had to reckon with death-dealing forces that are shaking the world order and inflicting suffering on many. We observed the shocking accumulation of wealth due to one global financial system, which enriches few and impoverishes many (Isaiah 5:8). This is at the root of many of today's wars, conflicts, ecological devastation, and suffering (1 Timothy 6:10). This global imperial system has made the financial market one of the idols of our time. It has also strengthened cultures of domination and discrimination that continue to marginalize and exclude millions, forcing some among us into conditions of vulnerability and exploitation. We are mindful that people on the margins bear the heaviest burden.

These issues are not new for 2018, but the Holy Spirit continues to move at this time, and urgently calls us as Christian communities to respond with personal and communal conversion, and a transforming discipleship.

Discipleship is both a gift and a calling to be active collaborators with God for the transforming of the world (1 Thessalonians 3:2). In what the church's early theologians called "theosis" or deification, we share God's grace by sharing God's mission. This journey of discipleship leads us to share and live out God's love in Jesus Christ by seeking justice and peace in ways that are different from the world (John 14:27). Thus, we are responding to Jesus' call to follow him from the margins of our world (Luke 4:16-19).

As disciples of Jesus Christ, both individually and collectively:

- We are called by our baptism to transforming discipleship: a Christ-connected way of life in a world where many face despair, rejection, loneliness, and worthlessness.
- We are called to worship the one Triune God—the God of justice, love, and grace—at a time when many worship the false god of the market system (Luke 16:13).
- We are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ—the fullness of life, the repentance and forgiveness of sin, and the promise of eternal life—in

word and deed, in a violent world where many are sacrificed to the idols of death (Jeremiah 32:35) and where many have not yet heard the gospel.

- We are called to joyfully engage in the ways of the Holy Spirit, who empowers people from the margins with agency, in the search for justice and dignity (Acts 1:8; 4:31).
- We are called to discern the word of God in a world that communicates many contradictory, false, and confusing messages.
- We are called to care for God's creation, and to be in solidarity with nations severely affected by climate change in the face of a ruthless human-centered exploitation of the environment for consumerism and greed.
- We are called as disciples to belong together in just and inclusive communities, in our quest for unity and on our ecumenical journey, in a world that is based upon marginalization and exclusion.
- We are called to be faithful witnesses of God's transforming love in dialogue with people of other faiths in a world where the politicization of religious identities often causes conflict.
- We are called to be formed as servant leaders who demonstrate the way of Christ in a world that privileges power, wealth, and the culture of money (Luke 22:25-27).

- We are called to break down walls and seek justice with people who are dispossessed and displaced from their lands—including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers—and to resist new frontiers and borders that separate and kill (Isaiah 58:6-8).
- We are called to follow the way of the cross, which challenges elitism, privilege, personal and structural power (Luke 9:23).
- We are called to live in the light of the resurrection, which offers hope-filled possibilities for transformation.

This is a call to transforming discipleship.

This is not a call that we can answer in our own strength, so the call becomes, in the end, a call to prayer:

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of life in all its diversity and beauty. Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, we praise you that you came to find the lost, to free the oppressed, to heal the sick, and to convert the self-centred. Holy Spirit, we rejoice that you breathe in the life of the world and are poured out into our hearts. As we live in the Spirit, may we also walk in the Spirit. Grant us faith and courage to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus: becoming pilgrims of justice and peace in our time. For the blessing of your people, the sustaining of the earth, and the glory of your name. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Notes

1. This report was dated March 23rd 2018. It is published by *Theofilos* in grateful memory of Knud Jørgensen, who died in December 2018. Jørgensen was a highly respected evangelical-ecumenical missiologist. See also <http://www.kirkenupdate.dk/kommentarer/KOMM1804e.HTM>.

2. See <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/cwme>.

3. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/mission-and-evangelism/the-arusha-call-to-discipleship>.