

International Consultation
"Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common Future"
Opening Address by the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches,
Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit

Geneva, 1 November 2010

Your Royal Highness,
Your Excellencies!
Your Eminences!

Dear friends!
And I would also like to add:
Dear sisters and brothers!

Welcome to this Muslim-Christian consultation that gives us an opportunity to address issues, exchange experiences and work together:

"Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common Future."

A warm welcome to the joint hosts of this event, to His Excellency Dr. Muhammad Ahmed Al-Sharif, General Secretary of the World Islamic Call Society, and to His Royal Highness, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, the initiator of the letter of 138 Muslim scholars, "A Common Word". Our organizations have been working on this event together for several months, following a meeting last December when a group of 12 experts from regions across the world identified the needs of our communities and suggested themes to address. We have serious work ahead of us in the coming four days, yet throughout the planning process we have learned a lot about how we can (and should) work together; how important it is to listen to one another's expectations and be attentive to the different cultural and linguistic expressions of the needs of our communities.

So it is heartening and indeed a great inspiration for me and for the World Council of Churches to receive you all here in the ecumenical centre today. We welcome also the general secretaries of the Christian World Communions meeting in Geneva these days, and you are together with us in the WCC representing the worldwide fellowship of Christian churches. The word "ecumenical" has the meaning of that which belongs to the whole inhabited world. We are gathered here from so many different parts of the world as neighbours in the same global community. We are living in the same global village. Some of us also belong to the same region or country; some of us even live very close to one another.

This meeting builds on many years of experience of the participating organizations and on countless projects and experiences of Muslims and Christians working together in different regions and situations. It brings together a wide and ecumenical Christian and Muslim representation from our various communities and our experiences in dialogue from around the world. This meeting also introduces a significant shift in planning Christian-Muslim dialogue by taking joint initiatives together. The central theme of our conference affirms that dialogue is important but that we also need to address issues of common concern and act together - putting the common good at the heart of our joint initiative so as to promote "dialogue in action".

The World Council of Churches has always focused on the "world" perspective and has helped the Christian churches to see themselves as belonging to a worldwide fellowship of churches. But more than that, the World Council of Churches has, since its very beginning, posed the question to the churches: How does the one humanity belong together in the one world? We share the same planet. We share the destiny of humanity. We all, each one of us and every human being, wherever we live, whoever we are, whatever faith we have, share the dignity of being created in the image of God.

So, dear friends, we are gathered here also as sisters and brothers created by God. From the first stories of creation in our Holy books, we know that the gift of personal relationship with other human beings, as man and woman, belongs to the crown of the work of creation. To overcome isolation and loneliness and create a community, a fellowship, is the highest will of the Creator. We also know that being granted descendants is one of the greatest tasks and gifts of humanity. More than that, we also read that being one humanity in diversity, as men and women, as brothers and sisters, as people living in different cultures and traditions is one of the most costly dimensions of life. We share the belief that God has created us differently to share our different gifts.

Already from the very beginning of the story of humankind we realize that the difficulty to accept the other, what the other does and also how the other worships God, even when this other is the brother, is one of the most demanding aspects of life. The question Cain asks in the book of Genesis after killing his beloved brother Abel in envy, as he tries to escape from his human accountability, is a reminder to all of us: Am I my brother's keeper? To be human is to be a brother and sister, to be a friend and a neighbour, caring for the other. Because we are all intended to be able to enjoy the life of this world together. To be human is to care for you, my brothers and sisters, and your wellbeing and your safety, so that you can live, serve and even die - when that day comes - in peace.

We are also gathered here as sisters and brothers, belonging - together with those of Jewish faith - to the Abrahamic tradition. Together we share these perspectives on life. The Creator gives us to one another as gift and calling, to live in the same community of this world. We are given the same dignity and rights to live and flourish in this community, and we are given the same accountability to one another and to the Creator. More even than this, we share the double commandment of loving God and our neighbour as ourselves. Life together is so easy and so demanding.

We are living in communities locally, nationally and globally that are changing rapidly. More than that: as religious leaders we are transforming communities. The question to all of us is not whether we have an influence in the transformation of communities, but what kind of influence do we have? We are here to talk to one another to discover the kind of influence that we want to have together, transforming our communities.

I would like to share with you some reflections from a single and simple but significant experience of how the relationships between the majority group of Christians and the growing minority group of Muslims in Norway has been transformed during recent years. I do this to highlight four major challenges for this conference.

Two years ago, we faced a situation in Norway where Muslims were being lumped together for public criticism because of an incident involving a Muslim. It was not the first time this had happened. As a church representative responsible for the standing committee for dialogue

with the Islamic Council of Norway, I felt it was my duty to react and to express my solidarity with the Muslims in Norway being unfairly attacked in this way. My point was that we all belonged to the same community, going through the same changes, therefore we belonged to the same "we". Any improper collective criticism of Muslims as a minority group was also a criticism of the wider "we" of Norway.

In a situation of migration of Muslims and Christians throughout the world, it is urgent actively to transform our common understanding of community, particularly since the community and the communities are experiencing rapid changes. Muslims and Christians want as much as anyone else to live a peaceful, decent life. Most people want to. To hurt and frighten a minority in an unfair way is to hurt the wider "we". When the Synagogue in Oslo was shot at, I gave a similar message to the media. An attack on the Jewish minority in Oslo was an attack on all of us belonging to the Norwegian "we", and an attack on the community we are transforming and building together.

So now for the challenges as I see them:

First: How can we become transforming communities by building a wider sense of the understanding of the word "we"? If we use the word "we" to be exclusive - "we, not you", or: "we, against you" - then we will strengthen caricatures and misconceptions of each other, we will increase tensions, fuel conflicts, and make things worse for all of us. We have great power but also a great responsibility in the way in which we use the word "we". The World Council of Churches has its offices in Geneva, but we are not a Western organization. We are a global fellowship of churches from the whole world where we try every day to say "we" in an inclusive and mutually responsible way. It is not easy. But it is absolutely necessary. We must show ourselves to be "keepers" of all with whom we live together. As religious leaders we have to provide moral leadership in our communities, demanding that others can have what we also want for ourselves and for the people for whom we are responsible. This is a matter of duties and rights based in our faith traditions. We must respect one another and every human being. The voice of all the churches in Switzerland against the ban on building minarets in this country is an outstanding example of what is needed.

Secondly: How can we build strong and sustainable relationships between Muslim and Christian leaders so that we can prevent crises and address the challenges together?

After joint efforts over several years to build solid cooperation and dialogue between the Islamic Council of Norway and the Church of Norway, the Muslim leaders in Norway made me aware of how discriminating language and insulting statements from the majority had a very negative effect on the Muslim minority. Having this well established relationship meant for example that we were able to address the so called cartoon crisis together with the same message and the same desire: we wanted to build a community where freedom of speech is protected, particularly for the benefit of minorities - which is the overall purpose of this principle - and a community where we all use our freedom of speech with wisdom so as not to undermine the dignity and mutual respect of one another. Of course we should not fool ourselves. At all levels of our communities there will be tensions and even conflicts. The essential question is how are we working together to prevent that, to build peaceful local and global communities with less tension, and how are we able to address the challenges together when they come? We should accept our responsibility as Muslim and Christian leaders and build stronger relationships between one another during these days, for the benefit of all we serve in our communities and communions. We should also think of how we encourage the

responsibility of every member in our communities - not only the leaders. How do we prepare a generation of responsible citizens in our societies, who are ready to take the initiative, and act in a responsible way toward the common good of the community?

For centuries, Christians and Muslims have lived together and shared the same challenges and hopes in many parts of the world, in the Middle East, in South East Asia, in parts of Africa and in Andalusia (Spain). Despite the history of Christian-Muslim co-existence not always being perfect, there have often been good examples of durable and solid “living together” to learn from. Yet we should encourage Muslim-Christian relationships to continue to be established in permanent and mutually accountable forms in all countries and in the local places and communities where we now live together.

Thirdly: How can we transform our communities through wise use of our spiritual and religious resources?

As a pastor and church leader I am blessed when I receive messages from people telling me that they are praying for me. There is one time when I received more of these messages than I usually do, that comes to my mind today. I remember it well because it surprised me. The days after making my modest public remarks about the collective judgement of Muslims, I received many messages of thanks from people saying they were praying for me. They did not come only from people in the church but from Imams and ordinary Muslims from throughout the whole of Norway. I was deeply moved and still am as I think about it.

We have a huge potential for creating something new together using our religious resources for peace and harmony between and within communities. Those resources invite us to go far beyond what we have already done together, without falling into syncretism or blurring the distinctiveness of our faiths. As human beings who pray, we can pray for peace, for one another and for the one world God has given us to live in - together.

Fourthly and finally: Good and peaceful relationships between Christian and Muslims are not only important for transforming our own communities. Many conflicts in our world today are related to religious identities even if these conflicts have primarily political, economic or cultural reasons. Our world, and all who live in it, are so much in need of peaceful and sustainable development and relationships. Islam and Christianity, as many other religions, have strong religious resources for building peace and taking care of the whole inhabited world, the *oikoumene*. My strong belief is that we are called together to become peacemakers, respecting the will of our Creator and our Creator’s love for the entire creation. It is our task to make sure that religion is not a synonym with conflict in the eyes of people, but a synonym for justice and peace.

In this conference therefore, we are not only challenged to find good ways of living and working together, but through that, we are challenged to take up our responsibility for justice, peace and sustainability for all who live on this planet.

It is my privilege and pleasure to offer these words of welcome to this significant encounter between all of us; welcome to this opportunity for open conversations; and for transforming our relationships for the better of our communities. May God bless us and give us wisdom, strength and most of all: Love.

Thank you.