

"With New Eyes"

Toward Advancing the Commitment of the World Council of Churches to Justice and Peace in Africa

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Abstract

*In commemorating 70 years of the existence of the World Council of Churches (WCC), especially its global commitment to promoting justice and peace, there is need to enhance its work especially in Africa. While acknowledging and appraising the WCC's efforts, this article suggests that the challenging case of Africa requires we seek and deploy fresh insights. This essay identifies poor ecumenical relations among churches in Africa as a key obstacle to the WCC's effort. However, it argues that the principles of dialogue espoused by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* could serve as powerful resources for the WCC in reimagining an ecumenical Africa that is committed to justice and peace.*

Keywords

Africa, ecumenism, World Council of Churches, Pope Francis, ubuntu, justice, peace

Aaron Tolen (1938–1999), one-time president of the World Council of Churches (WCC) (1991–98), was credited with insisting that the WCC should “begin to look at Africa with new eyes.”¹ This is not strange coming from a professional political scientist whose commitment to the ecumenical movement was focused on social justice. Beyond Tolen, the WCC has in the 70 years of its existence been committed to the question of justice and peace in different parts of the world. Yet, the scourge of social conflict in Africa today

¹ Nicholas Otieno and Hugh McCullum, *Journey of Hope: Towards a New Ecumenical Africa* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 79.

makes it expedient that we further deepen ecumenism directed toward social justice and peace. Perhaps it is time for the WCC to benefit more from Tolen's words by seeking ways of approaching the commitment to justice and peace in Africa with fresh insights.

This paper, in an attempt to elaborate on this claim, will, first, recall the profound commitment of the WCC in the quest for justice and peace in Africa as a way of commemorating the 70th anniversary of its existence, as well as of affirming that Africa has never been left out in the grand scheme of things. Second, it will argue that while efforts at social justice and peace may have been great, the required ecumenical commitment of churches in Africa to drive the WCC's programme is largely lacking. In arguing this, I will advance the reasons I believe to be responsible for this problem. Third, this article will examine insights from the principles of dialogue provided by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* as a way of reviving the ecumenical commitment to justice and peace in Africa among churches in Africa, which becomes, thus, a way of looking at Africa *with fresh eyes*.

The WCC and the Commitment to Justice and Peace

The commitment to justice and peace has always been central in the ecumenical movement. The 1925 Stockholm gathering, which birthed the Life and Work movement that was later integrated into the WCC, pointed to an agenda that preceded the formal existence of the WCC in 1948. Indeed, the existence of the WCC in the aftermath of the Second World War speaks volumes about the goal of justice and peace, which is perfectly aligned with the programme of unity. This connection is highlighted in a short essay by a former vice-moderator of the Faith and Order Commission, Paul A. Crow, titled 'Ecclesiology: The Intersection between the Search for Ecclesial Unity and the Struggle for Justice and Peace, and the Integrity of Creation'.² This work clearly expressed the link between unity and justice within a view of the church as *koinonia*.

The WCC has always operated with the understanding that the commitment to justice and peace is at the same time a commitment to Christian unity. The WCC's 5th Assembly of 1975, held in Nairobi, attempted to address, among other issues, structural systems of injustice designed by the powerful against the weak. In extending this concern, which had already begun in the preceding assembly in Uppsala in 1968, the Nairobi assembly deliberated extensively on issues concerning human rights, the struggle of

² Paul A. Crow, "Ecclesiology: The Intersection between the Search for Ecclesial Unity and the Struggle for Justice and Peace, and the Integrity of Creation," in *Costly Unity: Koinonia and Justice, Peace and Creation*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 53–58.

women, and racism.³ As a further follow-up, the 6th Assembly (Vancouver 1983) invited member churches "to make a clear covenanting commitment to work for justice and peace" and to resist the abhorrent powers of "racism, sexism, class domination, caste oppression, and militarism," while at the same time repudiating all forms of human development that foster social injustice.⁴ The Vancouver assembly roundly condemned all forms of domination as diabolic and hinged its covenantal invitation on the dual foundation of "confessing Christ as the life of the world" and "Christian resistance to the powers of death." These two commitments, as the Asian theologian and director for the WCC's ecumenical process for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation (JPIC), Preman Niles, argues, should be seen as "one and the same activity."⁵ They both belong to the single goal of the Christian unity to which the WCC is committed.

This commitment has been recently renewed in the face of the devastating social injustice we face in the world of today. The WCC took up this challenge at its 10th Assembly (Busan 2013) under the theme "God of life, lead us to justice and peace." In his report, the WCC's general secretary, Olav Fyske Tveit, highlights the double pathway of prayer and action that is required in this renewed commitment. According to him,

To pray to be guided in the way of peace is a bold commitment for us as churches, as a fellowship, and as individuals. It implies a willingness to be moved, to change, to advocate, to abandon complacency, to be missional and prophetic. This is why we cannot separate solidarity and service from communion, unity, mission, justice, and peace. Our programmes and new initiatives should carry this integral vision out together, involving one another and building relationships between us as churches and partners.⁶

Indeed, we cannot admit a bifurcation of both pathways since a prayer for peace is at once an action against injustice. However, it is an action that begins with the transformation of the one who prays, while leading to action on behalf of the oppressed, marginalized, and vulnerable as its inevitable consequence.

The WCC's commitment to promoting global justice and peace includes addressing the many social conflicts that one finds in Africa. Africa is today blighted by social conflict,

³ WCC, *Work Book for the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi 75* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1975), 50–62: Section V of the workbook deals with "structures of injustice and struggles for liberation."

⁴ David Gill, ed., *Gathered for Life: Official Report, VI Assembly World Council of Churches, Vancouver, Canada 24 July – 10 August 1983* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 89.

⁵ D. Preman Niles, *Resisting the Threats to Life: Covenanting for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), ix.

⁶ Olav Fyske Tveit, "Report of the General Secretary," in *Encountering the God of Life: Official Report of the 10th Assembly*, ed. Erlinda N. Senturias and Theodore A. Gill, Jr (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014), 2113–32 at 225.

wars, diseases, and poverty. Flagrant abuses of human rights and the insecurity of lives and property have become common norms. Most of these conflicts arise as a result of the absence of strong institutions that would guarantee justice, fairness, impartiality, accountability, and plurality. Most democratic practices in Africa are but hegemonies that thrive in situations of corruption and bad governance. Given all these along with the history of colonization and the ongoing exploitation of Africa, the condition of Africa remains a wound on the conscience of humanity. The WCC's effort at promoting justice and peace in Africa is only but the right action, even for the goal of Christian unity.

Even before the WCC held its 5th Assembly in Nairobi, Africa had already played host to the world ecumenical movement with the International Missionary Council (IMC) meeting of 1957 in Achimota, near Accra, Ghana. It was a meeting that ratified the proposal for the integration of the IMC and the WCC in 1961. Meanwhile in 1960, the WCC's central committee met in Enugu, Nigeria, where a president of the WCC, Sir Francis Akanu Ibiam, was serving as the first African governor of colonial Eastern Nigeria. This was the beginning of the WCC's history of involvement in issues of justice and peace in Africa. Hardly had the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967–70) begun when the WCC, at the behest of Ibiam, stepped into the heat. The WCC collaborated with the Vatican and the ecumenical Joint Church Aid (JCA) to provide aid to the Biafrans who faced food blockades by the Nigerian Federal forces, supported by the British and French governments. Akanu Ibiam led the Biafran Christian delegation to the WCC's assembly in Uppsala in 1968 (while Nigeria was represented by Bola Ige) to appeal for the intervention by the WCC.⁷ The WCC has since been involved in aid distribution to conflict victims across Africa and in working toward overcoming violence, efforts that led to the decision to inaugurate the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) at the WCC's Harare assembly in 1998.

The Harare assembly, which commemorated the 50th anniversary of the WCC, provided an opportunity for the council's rededication to the African dream and agenda of justice and peace in the 21st century. The assembly agreed to five recommendations that sought to deepen the WCC's programme of dialogue and solidarity in Africa, as well as its efforts at promoting justice and peace. In the second recommendation, which recaptures the scope of the WCC's commitment to social justice, African churches were asked to

⁷ Otieno and McCullum, *Journey of Hope*, 10–11. See also the article by Annegreth Schilling on the Uppsala assembly: "The Ecumenical Movement and 1968: The Uppsala Assembly as the Beginning of a New Era?" *Ecumenical Review* 70:2 (July 2018), 194–215.

- continue the unfinished task of working towards the transformation of their social, political, and economic systems and institutions with a view to creating a just society in which women and young people have the opportunity for full participation;
- seek and pursue peace and reconciliation for their people and communities;
- work towards the establishment of appropriate ethical values in work, governance and management, and good stewardship;
- do everything in their means to help contain and overcome the scourge of HIV/AIDS;
- affirm the right of African children to hope for a bright future which, with all strength and ability, they will help to create.⁸

The assembly further requested the churches to engage with the government and civil society and international institutions to bring about the "respect for human rights, the promotion of an alternative economic order, debt relief, reductions in the arms trade, and urgent measures to bring about peace and justice in . . . areas of conflict in Africa."⁹

Today, despite the great efforts directed toward these issues, we have yet to see significant changes. Rather, Africa faces even deeper crisis. What exactly is responsible for this failure? Are churches in Africa unable to work ecumenically to realize these dreams and agendas? It may be significant to note that the WCC's assembly in Harare presented these recommendations as the primary responsibility of the churches in Africa. On its side, the WCC understood its duty as "a commitment to work *with* and *through*" the churches in "*accompanying* . . . African brothers and sisters in their journey of hope."¹⁰ Of course, the WCC avoids any superintendent role since it conceives itself as a fellowship of churches. As such, it must always take a position that would ensure *mutual accountability* among the churches. It may therefore not be entirely wrong to assume that the persistence of conflict in Africa is largely due to indifference toward ecumenical dialogue among the churches in Africa. With such an attitude, none of the above recommendations can be achieved, since they all presuppose a robust ecumenical collaboration. Hence, there is need to examine ecumenical commitment of African churches with fresher eyes.

⁸ Diane Kessler, ed., *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 226.

⁹ Ibid., 227.

¹⁰ Ibid., 226. Emphasis added.

Africa's Perceived Indifference to Ecumenical Commitment

What began as robust ecumenical enthusiasm following the incorporation of Africa in the first decade of the existence of the WCC appears to have lost its steam. Qualified as being in a state of “despair” and “crisis,” and as “disorganized” and “struggling” in several parts of Africa,¹¹ there is no doubt that ecumenism is hardly thriving in Africa. In South Africa, for instance, the formidable structure and commitment of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) that witnessed the struggle against apartheid has weakened considerably today.¹² The same could be said in many parts of Africa, including Nigeria, a situation, I suggest, that has led to a certain level of apathy among churches concerning ecumenism.

Ecumenical apathy in Africa is the result of misplaced foundations. Other suggested causes, such as inadequate finances and theological experts, remain secondary, for “where there is a will, there is a way.” In many cases, ecumenical cooperation is conditioned by political and social necessities rather than the desire for Christian unity.¹³ On the one hand, African churches seem to be weighed down by the complex social problems in Africa. Because of this, they devote undue attention to social justice in a way that has little or no connection with ecumenical unity¹⁴ – without realizing how the absence or weakness of the latter adversely affects the effectiveness of the former. On the other hand, the internal struggle to emerge as the ecumenical voice of Christians in the public sphere has led church leaders into parochialism and political in-fighting. To change this situation, we thus need to seek new approaches that assist in refocusing ecumenism in Africa.

For a fresh approach to ecumenism in Africa, I consider two ideas to be very important. The first is a clear understanding that a sterile theological ecumenism will benefit African churches less than social ecumenism. And as already argued, an excessive focus on social ecumenism that is completely uninformed by adequate theology is never an option. Social ecumenism here ought to follow the model of the missionaries, who, discovering the futility of a missionary approach based purely on preaching and

¹¹ Molefe Tsele, “African Ecumenism within the Context of NEPAD,” in *African Christian Theologies in Transformation*, ed. Ernst Conradie (Stellenbosch: EFSA, 2004) 111–18; at 111.

¹² Jerry Pillay, “Faith and Reality: The Role and Contributions of the Ecumenical Church to the Realities and Development of South Africa since the Advent of Democracy in 1994,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73:4 (2017), 1–7. Pillay blames the weakening of SACC, especially in struggles toward social justice, on the fragmentation of the ecumenical movement in South Africa.

¹³ See Iheanyi M. Enwerem, *A Dangerous Awakening: The Politicization of Religion in Nigeria* (Ibadan: IFRA, 1995).

¹⁴ Jerry Pillay, “Ecumenism in Africa: Theological, Contextual, and Institutional Challenges,” *Ecumenical Review* 67:4 (2015), 635–50, at 640.

scripture, changed to a more pragmatic method of presenting an image of God who attends to the social needs of the people. Ecumenism can follow this model that buys into the African pragmatic disposition to existence and co-existence. Second, social ecumenism offers the best inroad to theological ecumenism in Africa – as long as it is not reduced to activities and projects but instead provides a philosophical education on how unity serves justice and peace. In learning *why* they ought to work together, people are led to work together for the common good, and in doing so they are further led to know, understand, and learn about and from one another.¹⁵ Walking together in the pursuit of justice and peace is a powerful reflection of a common faith that is lived together even when it is expressed differently. What has been missing is the component of “why” we should practise ecumenism from an African context, and Pope Francis’ principles might help in addressing this lack.

Pope Francis and the Task of Ecumenical Revival

The ecumenical interest of Pope Francis should be considered within a theological understanding of dialogue as integral and fundamental. This goes to the heart of the question: Why do we dialogue? To keep it simple, we dialogue because God has first engaged in dialogue with us through revelation and continues to do so through concrete others who are, in some way, potential mediators of God. In other words, dialogue has the potential to reveal aspects of God that have become hidden behind conflicts and ideologies. In this way, the awareness that comes through dialogical engagement, exercised in freedom and openness, could be understood as revelatory. Dialogue becomes, then, a Christian vocation, something we are called to do as a mark of our participation in divine Revelation. For Pope Francis, therefore, we cannot set boundaries to the object of dialogue, be it Christian, interreligious, nonreligious, ecological, and so on.

But why apply the views of Pope Francis, which are sometimes perceived as controversial,¹⁶ to the vision and programme of the WCC? I consider several reasons for such an integration of ideas. First, despite having only observer status, the Roman Catholic Church’s profound involvement in the work of the WCC since 1965 through

¹⁵ While these are laudable ideas, one admits that they are dangerously impaired by the shallow structure of the concrete ecumenical crusaders in place, seen in the nature and character of the formation of the many Christian denominations operating, for example, in Nigeria and Africa in general. Most of these churches are formed basically as business enterprises and often strongly resist every effort at uniting with others in pursuit of laudable actions, as advanced here.

¹⁶ Some of Francis’ critics have argued that his understanding, especially of dialogue, is not theological but more practical, and is in need of a deeper theological explanation. I’m thinking of especially Cardinals Raymond Mueller and Robert Sarah.

the instrument of the Joint Working Group implies a common interest in Christian unity. The Roman Catholic Church has full membership in the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC and is involved in various ecumenical activities of the WCC at different levels. Second, Pope Francis' agenda of dialogue is in line with an existing collaboration of the Catholic Church with the WCC. Third, the contact between Pope Francis and the WCC shows a certain level of convergence of vision. This can be seen in the visit of a WCC delegation to the Vatican in August 2017, which had a special audience with the Pope, and the visit of Pope Francis to Geneva for the 70th anniversary of the WCC on 21 June 2018. Pope Francis' presence in a WCC event with the theme "Walking, praying, working together" is quite symbolic, as the theme equally reflects Francis' ideas on dialogue in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) (244).¹⁷

Evangelii Gaudium has been described in various places as the "first programmatic text" of Francis' papacy.¹⁸ EG, although an apostolic exhortation, could be seen as a response to the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Catholic Faith, a prolongation of Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and a projection of the central concerns of the 2007 *Aparecida* document of the Latin American bishops (CELAM). While dialogue remains a dominating idea in EG, Francis, in the section devoted to ecumenical dialogue (244-246), expresses a sense of urgency in the wake of threats to social co-existence:

Given the seriousness of the counter-witness of division among Christians, particularly in Asia and Africa, the search for paths to unity becomes all the more urgent. Missionaries on those continents often mention the criticisms, complaints and ridicule to which the scandal of divided Christians gives rise . . . Signs of division between Christians in countries ravaged by violence add further causes of conflict on the part of those who should instead be a leaven of peace. How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! (EG 246)

One critical element here is the attention to the very existential problems of conflict being faced by people in Asia and Africa that calls for the church's ecumenical commitment. Of course, Francis' invitation to dialogue is for everyone, about everything, and

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy, consecrated Persons, and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (EG), 24 November 2013 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 186–216.

¹⁸ Annemarie C. Mayer, "The Ecumenical Vision of Pope Francis: Journeying Together as Fellow Pilgrims – 'The Mystery of Unity Has Already Begun,'" *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 17:3 (2017), 156–72; 158; Massimo Faggioli, "Ecumenism in *Evangelii Gaudium* and in the Context of Francis' Pontificate," *Perspectiva Teológica Adere a Uma Licença* 48:1 (2016), 17–35, at 21.

to everywhere (EG 238, 245). This "world-Church turn," as Italian historian and theologian Massimo Faggioli puts it, implies that for the Pope, "ecumenism is no longer only part of the self-satisfied narrative on the peaceful nature of post-World War II Europe after the centuries of interreligious wars. Ecumenism is part of those areas of the world where religion is intertwined with violence (whether sectarian, ethnic, or nationalist)."¹⁹ It is from this perspective that I consider the profound implications of EG's principles of dialogue for the WCC's recommitment to Africa of an ecumenical quest toward justice and peace.

In his reflection in EG, Pope Francis links common good to the quest for justice and peace.²⁰ This connection is made against the background of ecumenical dialogue expressed through the metaphor of "companionship of pilgrims"²¹ in describing the Christian quest for unity: "We must never forget that we are *pilgrims journeying alongside one another*. This means that we must have sincere trust in our *fellow pilgrims*, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God's face" (EG 244, emphasis added). But how can churches in Africa overcome the temptation to mistrust one another? An atmosphere of mutual suspicion greatly sabotages any attempt by the WCC to pursue peace within Africa. In other words, no effort of the WCC can succeed without the basic involvement of ecumenical actors in Africa. The principles advanced by Pope Francis offer a possible solution, one in which African churches are reminded of what "Africa" stands for. Thus Africa is reconceived as existentially prior to "churches" and in this way as foundational to any ecumenical (joint) commitment to justice and peace. Francis outlines four key principles to this effect, namely: (1) time is greater than space; (2) unity prevails over conflict; (3) realities are more important than ideas; and (4) the whole is greater than the parts (EG 222–237). I shall briefly examine these in the context of the WCC's agenda of peace in Africa.

Time is greater than space

Pope Francis recognizes the tension between "fullness and limitation" (EG 222). Time is associated with *fullness* that is future oriented, unlike space, which attempts to crystallize processes in the present. Space here is concerned with power and immediate results. Ecumenism in Africa should look beyond immediate outcomes and focus on establishing processes that are based on time-tested values as a more sustainable way of seeking unity and social justice. By so doing, the WCC would be paying "attention

¹⁹ Faggioli, "Ecumenism in *Evangelii Gaudium*," 22.

²⁰ Section III of EG is titled "The Common Good and Peace in Society."

²¹ Mayer, "Ecumenical Vision of Pope Francis," 159. Mayer summarizes Pope Francis' ecumenical vision as one in which "unity is created in the journeying itself," provided everyone is "on the move together" (*ibid.*, 169).

to the bigger picture,” with “openness to suitable processes and concern for the long run” (EG 225).

Unity prevails over conflict

Pope Francis challenges Christians not to shy away from conflicts, since the price of unity and peace are central to Christian mission (EG 227). The mission of conflict resolution makes it possible to build solidarity and “communion amid disagreement.” However, the pope warns against any form of absorption and urges for what he called a “reconciled diversity” (EG 230). Reconciled diversity is a form of unity-in-difference that is operable where one recognizes that acceptance and recognition of different understandings of the same faith are at the heart of ecumenical encounter. Without giving up a church’s unique heritage “for the sake of homogenization,”²² reconciled diversity insists on “walking together, praying and working together, and together seeking unity in truth.”²³ Given the scramble for members and territories, churches in Africa understandably often do not consider unity attractive. But there is need to look beyond immediate interests to see the connection between the lack of unity and the conflict in the society. A greater common good of justice and peace should constitute enough impetus for unity, and vice versa.

Realities are more important than ideas

A similar tension is noticed between ideas and realities. Pope Francis poignantly defines both: “Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out” (EG 231). He then calls for a hermeneutical approach to both, wherein the tension is held together in dialogue. Realities, however, are to be prioritized over ideas. In the pragmatic explanation – of “incarnation of the word and its being put into practice” (EG 232) – one wonders if this principle does not contradict my attempt here to revive an existential African worldview as a critical tool for ecumenical action toward justice and peace. Francis’ argument, however, is that ideas must not be disconnected from the concrete experiences

²² Oscar Cullman, *Unity through Diversity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 9. Protestant theologian Oscar Cullmann has been acknowledged as the originator of the concept of “reconciled diversity.” But the model “unity in reconciled diversity” was already proposed by the Lutheran World Federation at its 1977 assembly in Dar es Salaam. This model emphasizes the legitimacy and value of denominational identities. For Marlin VanElderen, reconciled diversity as a model of Christian unity implies that “individual denominational identities should be retained as points of reference within a larger Christian identity which develops as different traditions are ‘reconciled’ to one another, overcoming past differences and accepting diverse styles of Christian expression.” Marlin VanElderen, *Introducing the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 45.

²³ Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti, eds, *Pope Francis: Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 2013), 228.

of a people, that there should be no importation of "foreign rationality," and that our actions must be motivated by "realities illuminated by reason" (EG 232).

The whole is greater than the parts

Pope Francis cautions against opting for either globalization or localization, either of which obliterates differences when taken separately. He illustrates this principle with the figure of the polyhedron, "which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness" (EG 236). Francis goes on to state that this model reflects "the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good which truly has a place for everyone" (EG 236). A reinvention of the unique African life that bridges the tension of the whole and the part – of the community and the individual – speaks to the heart of the gospel of Christ, which embraces everyone. In putting this challenge before African churches, the WCC would be holding the tension between globalization and localization in a critical harmony.

Considering the above principles of Pope Francis, however, how can the Christian churches in Africa be challenged to embrace themselves in order to reflect the integrity or totality of the gospel in their society? How can the churches refocus on the bigger picture of overcoming conflicts rather than on parochial interests? Is there a place for everyone around the table of ecumenical dialogue in Africa – such that the suspicion of absorption or loss of identity is avoided? Why should the idea of "the whole is greater than the parts" be attractive to individual churches in Africa? What lesson might Pope Francis' views offer to the reappraisal of African solidarity for an ecumenical commitment to justice and peace?

Ecumenical Incentive to African Solidarity

The task here is to ascertain how Pope Francis' position provides an ecumenical incentive to a uniquely African pathway toward justice and peace in Africa. At this point, it seems reasonable to look at the commonality that could appeal to an African identity in an ecumenical call that involves different churches in Africa. Indeed, at the core of the ecumenical principles of Pope Francis is something that transcends denominational identities in the search for justice and peace in Africa. What is left to determine is whether we can reconcile the African concept of solidarity with the pope's principles – thus constituting an enrichment of the treasure of African solidarity.

Stan Chu Ilo, a Nigerian theologian at the Centre for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, De Paul University, offers practical reflection in the context of the African

church that we can directly apply to this discussion. His intercultural hermeneutics of *friendship* and *participation* provide the needed praxis to sustain an ecumenical commitment founded on African solidarity. He roots his vision of participation and friendship in the trinitarian life of communion that all humans are called to share. Sharing in the life of God takes the mode of this life of God – it is sharing in the life of divine communion. This sharing in the life of God is made possible by Christ who “gives us access” and the Holy Spirit who leads us “to share in the inner life of the Trinity.”²⁴ What is critical in Ilo’s analysis is the concept of *life* (vital union, vital bond) that affords a common participation by men and women.

Ilo’s principle of participation resonates in the African philosophy of *ubuntu*.²⁵ *Ubuntu* recaptures the fundamental relationship that exists among all created realities. All are interconnected, sometimes in the form of cartographies. Thus, it is about a sharing, a participation that is at once communal and personal. But most essentially, it is existential. Ilo illustrates thus: “We are through other people; I am related therefore I am; I am loved therefore I exist; I exist in order to participate in community, and I am nothing if I am not in community and friendship with others – nature and humans (living, dead, and those not yet born).”²⁶ The intrinsic nature of this *participation* could mean that we ought to understand ourselves as existentially open to one another in the form of solidarity. For Pope Francis, Christian communities ought to be spaces of “living communion and participation” (EG 28). According to him, the church’s task of fostering “a dynamic, open and missionary communion” (EG 31) requires the indispensable elements of participation and dialogue. Missionary communion is never to be understood as limited to the internal life of the church, but rather is to be taken in an ecumenical sense. It is important to note that it is the Holy Spirit who opens the heart to believe in Christ (1 Cor. 12:3), thus making solidarity and communion possible. It is the Holy Spirit that forms the church as a community gathered around, and for, God. Without

²⁴ Stan Chu Ilo, “Crosscurrents in African Christianity: Lessons for Intercultural Hermeneutics of Friendship and Participation,” *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Vladimir Latonovic et al., 183–96 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 192.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 194. Although having a South African origin, *buntu* (Bantu) is generally accepted as reflecting the African worldview to a large extent. It is widely applied in many fields of study – philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and theology – to highlight African particularity. See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), also *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings*, ed. Pieter H. Coetzee & Abraham P. J. Roux (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2002); Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009); Mvuselelo Ngcoya, “*Ubuntu*: Toward an Emancipatory Cosmopolitanism?” *International Political Sociology* 9:3 (2015), 248–62.

²⁶ Ilo, “Crosscurrents in African Christianity,” 194.

the Holy Spirit, the church will remain closed to the salvific gift of God and so cannot survive.²⁷ This explains why this solidarity has guided the church all through history as it communicates and transmits the faith it has received. I argue therefore that some of the barriers to ecumenical solidarity could be considered as artificially constructed and ought to be dismantled as much as possible, with much care and patience since the process could be very taxing.

Christian solidarity as a call to relearn the existential openness in the relation among ecclesial communities expresses its dynamism not only in terms of participation but also in friendship. An ecclesial friendship that is built on love is after all a central command in the Christian faith. Pope Francis captures this well when he argues that God's love "blossoms into an enriching friendship" that liberates us from our "narrowness and self-absorption" (EG 8). From the perspective of *ubuntu*, Ilo asserts that this friendship "presuppose[s] a certain equality, autonomy, shared life, respect, and acceptance; it also presupposes solidarity, collaboration, and cooperation."²⁸ It is perhaps instructive to note that dialogue usually first leads to conflict, which is a necessary passage on the path to healing and restoring justice to the oppressed and marginalized. Friendship can only happen if conflict is resolved through dialogue. However, conflict can be long and often means that there are no easy answers.²⁹ In friendship, therefore, we participate in the *life* of the other. We become open to the other and the other becomes open to us as well. Dialectically, this process reflects "a losing and discovery of self and the other and a redemptive step towards fulfillment of the promise of life at the heart of the Trinity, the Christian faith, and the entire cosmos."³⁰

Pope Francis also captures this sense of reflexivity and reciprocity in the idea of friendship. He asks quite poignantly: "[I]f we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?" (EG 8). Friendship with God (or Jesus) has consequences for communion. Therefore, there is an interrelation between life, community, and friendship (EG 49, 228, 248, 265). Friendship with God flows out into friendship within human communities, carrying with it the meaning of life. With regard to the two principles of participation and friendship, then, Pope

²⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), no. 12, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

²⁸ Ilo, "Crosscurrents in African Christianity," 194.

²⁹ The persistent Christian–Muslim conflict in most African countries is an instance where the enthusiasm for continuous dialogue has waned, but friendship as a dialogical approach could help resolve the crisis. We find this example in the spectacular case of Imam Mohammed Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye (*The Imam and the Pastor*), founders of the Interfaith Mediation Center, Kaduna, Nigeria.

³⁰ Ilo, "Crosscurrents in African Christianity," 194–95.

Francis' understanding of dialogue and common good resonates with the African concept of solidarity in a way that has much import for ecumenical engagement in Africa.

In sum, Pope Francis' principles, which are also emphasized by the WCC's quest for harmony in communities, reflect an antidote against actions and practices that upturn peace and create injustice in society. Faith is the precise resource for this antidote. The church in Africa has the responsibility to promote these ideals, but to do so it must embrace dialogue that must begin from an ecumenical setting built on the principles of participation and friendship. Pope Francis' understanding of dialogue as reflected in the four principles reminds African churches to tap into their worldview to address issues of conflict and divisions. For instance, a *reappraisal* of the prevalence of "unity" and the greatness of "the whole" in Africa, as further captured in some nuggets of traditional wisdom,³¹ is a key incentive of Pope Francis' ecumenical perspectives that could serve the agenda of the WCC. Such reappraisal is echoed in the African concept of *ubuntu*, which, with its emphasis on the interrelatedness of all things, constitutes a very powerful resource for ecumenical engagement toward justice and peace, especially in Africa.

Concluding Comments

Looking at Africa *with new eyes* requires looking into Africa for deep insight. It is about rediscovering what makes Africa "Africa" as the key to ecumenical unity and the quest for social justice. The WCC already recognized this at its assembly in Harare in 1998, where it affirmed, "There are clear signs within Africa, alongside the vibrant Christian faith and spiritual vitality, of the emergence of a new spirit of patriotism, a sense of pride in identity ('ubuntu') and a desire to construct a different image of the continent."³² Unfortunately, this realization was never followed up.

Meanwhile, this realization was premised upon an understanding that the condition of social injustice and conflict in Africa "is never going to be served by prevailing moral relativism and selectivity." In other words, Africans must return to "some common, shared and abiding values"³³ that have historically defined their common existence.

³¹ One immediately recalls some concepts within the Igbo culture, such as "*igwebuike*" – which as a principle of solidarity implies that strength lies in the community or unity rather than in individualism, and "*ofu obi*" – which as a communal principle refers to "unity of minds." Perhaps these two concepts will be taken up in subsequent research.

³² Kessler, *Together on the Way*, 225.

³³ *Ibid.*, 213. See the response to the African Plenary by the Policy Reference Committee II, Harare 1998.

These values are captured by the idea of *ubuntu*, which according to Barney Pityana is "the *creed* that has held many Africans to an ideal that affirms one's humanity as being tied up with the humanity of others."³⁴ Following this, Pityana called on Africa to avoid the two extremes of relapsing into, on the one hand, gloom resulting from the weight of the social ills bedevilling the country, or on the other, self-glorification of Africa's history in human civilization. Pityana's arguments are valid. The first extreme leads to self-exoneration of Africa, in which we exculpate ourselves from the responsibilities of current problems; the second leads to a masking the reality of suffering in Africa and a psychological diminution of the pain African people experience today. However, while Pityana sees a moral regeneration in Africa as foundational to the transformation of the continent's problems, here I have advanced a broader vision of cultural regeneration. In it we rediscover what lies at the root of our natural disposition to solidarity and hospitality, without which the acceptance of Christianity (and even Islam) would have been impossible in pre-colonial Africa. This cultural regeneration, encapsulated in *ubuntu* and made practicable through the hermeneutics of participation and friendship, is the way forward for the WCC in its commitment to justice and peace in Africa. Pope Francis' principles of dialogue prove invaluable in this regard.

³⁴ Ibid. Pityana argues this in his "Africa: The Footprint of God," a critical interpretation of the powerful political play *A Journey of Hope*, written by Wahome Mutahi and performed by the popular Zimbabwean theatre group (ZACT) at Harare 1998.