

# **From Inter-Church Aid to Jubilee**

**A brief history of ecumenical diakonia  
in the World Council of Churches**

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Cover photo: Refugees fleeing from Hungary  
during the 1956 uprising  
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*'The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship [...] through witness and service to the world.*

*'In seeking koinonia in faith and life, witness and service, the churches through the Council will [...] express their commitment to diakonia in serving human need'.*

WCC Constitution, Article III

## Introduction

From its inception, the World Council of Churches has considered diakonia as an inseparable component of the ecumenical vision, together with worship, fellowship and witness to the world. This short survey attempts to record the place of practical sharing and solidarity in the ecumenical movement, and to illustrate how this work evolved within WCC over the first fifty years. The words used to describe this work changed over time, but the words are not in themselves important. Whether we speak of inter-church aid, diakonia, or sharing and solidarity, the essence is the same. The important constant is the understanding that the theological, spiritual and moral convictions of the ecumenical movement need to be translated into genuine acts of solidarity if the vision of ecumenism is to be credible, relevant and rooted in the lives of people.

**“Diakonia is an inseparable component of the ecumenical vision, together with worship, fellowship and witness to the world.”**

## In the beginning: churches helping churches

In the years before the Second World War, the two main streams of the ecumenical movement – the Faith and Order movement and the Life and Work movement – did not include inter-church aid among their activities, as this was mainly taken care of by the European Central Bureau for Inter-Church Aid, founded in 1922. As the WCC was being established in the context of the Second World War and its aftermath, the first WCC General Secretary, Dr Visser't Hooft, called for a 'system of mutual aid' for which all the churches would feel responsible and which would have its rightful place in the total life of the ecumenical movement.

'For in the language of the Christian Church, that word "fellowship" (koinonia) is a most substantial expression describing the life of the church as the common life of a people, who, because of their sharing in the confession of one and the same Lord, are expected to share the spiritual and material gifts they have received. St Paul teaches that "the gracious work" of practising solidarity belongs to the essence of the new life and is a test of its reality (2 Cor. 8-9).'<sup>1</sup> So strong was Visser't Hooft's conviction about this, that he made his acceptance of his appointment to WCC conditional upon the readiness of the Council to become active

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in the field of mutual aid, ‘for there could be no healthy ecumenical fellowship without practical solidarity’.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, WCC went on to establish many and varied departments and instruments for ecumenical service and for the alleviation of human need. In 1944 the Department of Reconstruction was established to help the war-stricken churches of Europe. This work of assistance was officially recognized during the first meeting of the Central Committee of the WCC as ‘a permanent ecumenical obligation’. National inter-church aid committees were formed by WCC in both giving and receiving countries, and some special pieces of work, or ‘projects’, were implemented directly by WCC with funds sent through Geneva, thus establishing a basic model of work that would continue for decades.<sup>3</sup> By 1945 the Department was merged with the older European Central Bureau and was renamed the WCC Department of Reconstruction and Inter-Church Aid, later the Department of Inter-Church Aid and Service to Refugees (DICASR).

### **Responding to need: inter-church aid in the WCC**

In the first years, the focus of WCC’s attention was the reconstruction of the Christian churches in Europe, recovering from the devastation, suffering and divisions of the recent conflagration. Over the following years, the mandate and action of the WCC in the broad area of solidarity would develop in three main directions.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, emergency aid work soon developed as a major arm of the churches’ international diaconal ministry, initially concentrated on the war-ravaged countries and churches of Europe. It was through the work of the WCC that the newly established church-related development agencies first managed to co-ordinate their response to humanitarian disasters, and it was often through the WCC that the churches in disaster situations received ecumenical assistance. Initially a part of the WCC’s own structures, in the 1990’s a specialized instrument for emergency relief, ACT (Action by Churches Together) International, was established in cooperation with the Lutheran World Federation.

Solidarity of the Northern (European and American) churches with younger churches in the Southern hemisphere was a second area of rapid

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expansion in the early days of inter-church aid. Ecumenical assistance undertook from the missionary movement much of the work related to development and social welfare. It was shaped and reshaped over the years with the evolving ecumenical debate. In the fifties the keynote was compassion; in the sixties this gave way to the concern to promote responsible society, and then in the late sixties and seventies to the struggle for social justice. In the eighties the rallying call was for solidarity and empowerment in the midst of enormous human rights violations, while during the nineties the post-apartheid and post-communist era called for assistance to be linked with truth and reconciliation processes.

A third area of rapid development for inter-church aid was in the field of refugee service, which had already commenced to assist Christians (and later also Jews) fleeing the Nazis. The WCC Refugee Service was founded in 1944, and by 1949 had been integrated into DICASR. After the war, efforts were expanded to respond to the needs of Eastern Europeans escaping from the occupying Red Army and the growing influence of the Soviet Union. The Hungarian uprising in 1956 was a defining moment for the refugee service. The WCC assisted 85,000 refugees who fled across the border into Austria. This work was formative because it saw the development of a rapid-response capacity between inter-church aid committees across borders and was supported by the generous giving of the member churches in response to WCC appeals. The WCC was one of the first international organizations to work closely with the UNHCR when it was created in 1951. The refugee and migration desk became an integral part of the WCC diaconal structure, facilitating a broad international network of related groups and organizations. Today there are more 'uprooted people' than ever before and although borders are disappearing for the movement of goods, services, and capital, they are more fixed and inaccessible than ever for people who find themselves 'on the move' against their will.

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## The ecumenical project system

In 1956, WCC's DICASR published its first 'project list', which was a compilation of defined and budgeted pieces of work from the churches around the world, seeking resources from western churches and agencies. Intended to encourage church actions for the benefit of the wider

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community, the projects were screened and recommended for funding by national councils of churches in the South and listed by WCC for support from ecumenical agencies. WCC 'priority projects' were introduced in 1971 and sought to guarantee funding in advance from undesignated ecumenical funds, thereby avoiding that donors could pick and choose according to their own (partial) interests. As the project list developed into a major feature of the life and work of WCC staff, it also became the subject of heated debate. The procedures were slow, the resources relatively limited, and the relationships between WCC, donor agencies and project holders became increasingly complex. As early as 1973 the abolition of the project list was proposed as part of an effort to deepen real partnership in the sharing of resources among churches. However, the support of projects continued to form an important component of WCC's work, although the bulk of direct project work was undertaken by specialized church agencies.

## **From a European to a global focus**

As the immediate post-war problems of Europe receded, the WCC Department of Reconstruction and Inter-Church Aid began to look further afield. By the time of the WCC Evanston Assembly (1954) a growing number of church voices from the Southern hemisphere were being heard within the WCC. The growing participation of non-European churches had significant implications for the WCC Division of Inter-Church Aid and Service to Refugees (DICASR). At the WCC Evanston Assembly the delegates recognized and endorsed the ever-widening horizons of the diaconal work. The department was urged to take on a worldwide mandate to include Asia, Africa and Latin America. The new mandate also brought a shift in emphasis from rehabilitation of churches in Europe to their former standards of relative prosperity, to supporting poor and mostly minority churches in 'third world' countries.

The period from Evanston to New Delhi (1954-1961) was remarkable for the growth and expansion of ecumenical diakonia, not only in terms of budget and personnel but in terms of the growth in understanding amongst the members of the WCC regarding the nature and scope of the ecumenical tasks needing to be addressed. The critical space given to Southern voices and regional perspectives in theological and social

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reflection was mirrored in the way that the practical response of the ecumenical family to world-wide human suffering expanded from being a European to a global concern.

### Deepening the reflection on the nature and purpose of inter-church aid

The WCC New Delhi Assembly (1961) not only changed the name of the division responsible for inter-church aid to DICARWS (Division of Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service), but it also explicitly re-articulated the aims and approach of the ecumenical movement in this area of activity. The mandate of the division was described as 'to express the solidarity of the churches (...) especially in their service to the world around them (diakonia), and to provide facilities by which the churches may serve men and women in acute human need everywhere'. This mandate intentionally began to use the language of diakonia, and to speak in a new way about solidarity as service to the world rather than solidarity between churches, 'to help meet the needs on behalf of humanity and without distinction of creed, caste, race, nationality or politics'. To reflect this shifting focus, the already existing WCC desks for Europe, the Orthodox, and the Near East were supplemented in 1961 by the creation of desks for Asia and Latin America, and later by a research desk for the study and survey of areas of acute human need. In 1962 the geographical spread was further expanded with the creation of the Africa desk.

This shift in emphasis was consistent with the main debates taking place within the WCC. Rapid social change was the all-consuming focus of analysis and discussion. The challenge in this perplexing context was to discern how to be responsible citizens and faithful witnesses. The global character of the WCC was further enhanced by the integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) into the WCC as the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). This raised practical and theological questions about division of labour in the area of development projects. The old forms of service imported by the Western missionary societies were not adequate to cope with the dramatic changes affecting the newly liberated countries of the South.

Following New Delhi, a major focus of the WCC was the study on Christian responsibility towards areas of rapid social change. This study

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had serious implications for the work done by both DICARWS and CWME. The study increasingly reflected voices from the South that were critical of the development assistance that characterised some of the work supported by both these sections of the Council. The conclusions to the study were presented and discussed at the major WCC Church and Society conference held in Geneva in 1966. The conference called on the churches to move away from direct aid – because it often created new dependencies – and to show support instead for development programmes that were locally funded and locally run. Churches from Asia, Africa and Latin America were increasingly calling for a new understanding of the meaning of giving and receiving. Interdependence was seen as an opportunity, but also as an obstacle, so long as paternalistic attitudes and asymmetrical structures were not transformed into ‘sharing communities’ of the Gospel. During the late 1960s, this attention to transformation and social justice was to become increasingly important.

Throughout this period, WCC actively encouraged the formation of networks of NGOs to respond collectively to challenges in emergency response. In 1962, WCC was a founding member of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, a coalition of 80 NGO consortia from all regions, and continues to play a leadership role within this alliance. In 1972, WCC was a founding member of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) which now brings together seven of the largest religious and secular NGOs and the Red Cross Movement involved in humanitarian operations, to share information and advocate with the concerned UN agencies. SCHR is, jointly with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the author and promoter of the code of conduct for NGOs in Disaster Relief.

### **Diakonia as transfer of power**

‘Justice, not charity’ was a keynote for the debate about ecumenical diakonia during these years, and especially at the time of the WCC Uppsala Assembly (1968). The self-preservation of the global system, with increased militarisation and violation of human rights, was identified as an obstacle to the survival of humanity and the whole creation. Appeals for a new world order could never achieve the change that was needed. The unjust gap between the rich and powerful and the poor and

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marginalized was recognized as sinful, and within the churches themselves, as schismatic. Many participants at the Assembly were motivated by the vision of becoming a universal church in serving humanity as a world diaconal fellowship. Social development and development education were given high priority for the whole WCC and its member churches. Solemnly the churches committed themselves to work for justice, human dignity and development.

Empowerment of the poor and sharing in the struggle for justice and human dignity were not the only task for social action and initiative in the WCC understanding. Transfer of power and mutual participation was on the agenda of the churches themselves. The changing world situation and the development of the ecumenical movement created an increasing demand for a reappraisal of ecumenical diakonia.

### **The Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD)**

As a reflection of this change, three years after the Uppsala Assembly, the Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD) was established and was integrated into WCC alongside the newly-named CICARWS (Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service). CCPD was intended to approach the notion of development in a more comprehensive way than before. CCPD devoted resources to development education, research and reflection, concentrating on the view that what was required was not aid, but structural change, towards a more just and participatory society. Liberation theology rediscovered God's preferential option for the poor and sought a fundamental transfer of power. This change would come about through the actions of people themselves: 'people's participation' became the hallmark of CCPD's understanding of development. One of its most important activities was to foster networks linking and mobilizing people's movements all over the world. CCPD initiated a programme of action and reflection examining the growing estrangement between the church and the poor, going back to the industrial revolution and the colonial period. Later, CCPD developed its critical reflection of the international financial institutions and world economic order, culminating in the ecumenical conciliar process on 'Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation'.

Attempts were made to work out the ideological and structural relationship between CCPD and CICARWS. In practice, considerable

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divergence emerged in the way the two commissions worked. Throughout the 1970's and 1980's CCPD concentrated on linking and supporting movements all over the world. CICARWS focused primarily, but not exclusively, on more traditional forms of relief and development, and response to immediate needs.

**A new concept:  
ecumenical sharing of resources**

Growing criticism in this period of the project system gave rise to proposals as early as 1971 for a moratorium on the sending of funds for mission in Africa from outside the region in order to oblige younger churches to stand on their own feet. It was argued that the relationship of donor churches in the North and local churches in the South actually inhibited mission and the struggle for social justice. In this view the question was not 'what can the churches do for the poor' but 'are the churches prepared to live with the poor and take part in their struggle for liberation?' After the WCC Nairobi Assembly (1975) the stress was more on sharing, rather than giving or receiving, and on resources (cultural, spiritual, theological, human) not only on funds, so that better ways to share with each other might emerge. The moratorium debate encouraged this approach to 'ecumenical sharing of resources' (ESR).

The first event in the ESR process was the Glion Consultation (1977) involving CICARWS, CCPD and CWME on 'Conditions of Sharing'. The report criticised the existing structures of giving and receiving (e.g. project lists) which perpetuated patterns of domination and dependence. Instead of creating a more just state of affairs, 'funds flowing from rich to poor churches are part of the unjust structures of the world'.

In order to explore new ways of ecumenical-sharing, responsibility for this reflection was transferred in 1983 from CICARWS to a new WCC Office for Resource Sharing, based within the WCC general secretariat in recognition of its relevance to many other areas of the Council's work. The 'ecumenical sharing of resources' was designed to supersede the more traditional ways of giving and receiving resources typified by the project list. Sharing was to be more equal. All would be givers and receivers. Resources were to be understood not only as material, but were to include spiritual, theological and cultural resources.

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More people were to have access to decisions, especially to those which directly affected them. The responsibility of all partners was to be devolved to a level closer to the local churches and communities – a process that became known as ‘regionalization’. WCC ecumenical ‘regional groups’ were originally set up in the early 1970s by CICARWS to help with the screening and listing of projects. In 1982 the WCC issued its first ‘Resource Sharing Book’, and by 1983 regional resource-sharing groups had been formed.

The WCC central committee had decided in 1976 that priority should be given to ‘initiatives aimed at exploring new ways of sharing resources’. This process was one of three elements of re-examination of ecumenical diakonia in line with the self-critical perspective of the Nairobi assembly. The others were a revision of the project system and a process of reflection on ‘Service and Unity’ and ‘Mutual Aid and Solidarity’, later culminating in the international consultation on ‘Contemporary Understandings of Diakonia’ in Geneva in 1982. All three were connected by a Eucharistic vision of diakonia, which was most pronounced in a contribution from the Orthodox churches.

The Geneva Consultation (1982) on ‘Contemporary Understandings of Diakonia’ sought to define the principles and practice of diakonia that had come to prominence since the previous Assembly in Nairobi. In its report, it characterised diakonia as a ecumenical resource-sharing system in terms of eight key phrases:

- 1/ Essential for the life and well being of the church;
- 2/ Concentrating on the local level;
- 3/ Worldwide in international solidarity;
- 4/ Preventive of the growth and sustenance of unjust structures;
- 5/ Concerned with structural and political dimensions;
- 6/ Humanitarian beyond the household of faith;
- 7/ Mutual;
- 8/ Liberating with stress on empowerment and promoting participation of the people.

**“The basis of diakonia is the self-emptying love (kenosis) of Jesus Christ, the deacon, whose sacrifice was made for the salvation of all humankind.”**

### **A Eucharistic vision of diakonia**

The consultation on ‘The Orthodox Approach to Diakonia’ (Chania, 1978) was a major event in the CICARWS reflection process. An Orthodox approach to diakonia understands it in terms of the ‘liturgy after the liturgy’, an extension of the holy Eucharist and an expression of the unity of the Church as the body of Christ. Such an approach does not separate the vertical from the horizontal dimension, love of God from love of neighbour, the micro-from the macro-level of diaconal service. The basis of diakonia is the self-emptying love (kenosis) of Jesus Christ, the deacon, whose sacrifice was made for the salvation of all humankind.<sup>4</sup> This Orthodox contribution to ecumenical reflection, emphasizing the broader sense of diakonia as rooted in the sacramental life and in the vision of the kingdom of God, was to provide an important counterbalance to the increasingly complex ecumenical approach to effective programmes and specialized ministries to the marginalized.

### **The search for a more holistic vision: diakonia in koinonia**

During the 1980s there emerged in the ecumenical movement a recognition of the limitations of institutions and systems of sharing. Contextualised theologies of diakonia, and rediscovery of the pivotal importance of the local community within a comprehensive and holistic approach, challenged CICARWS and others with the perception of increasing but necessary diversity. The official report of the WCC VI Assembly (Vancouver 1983) confirms the direction:

‘Diakonia as the church’s ministry of sharing, healing and reconciliation is of the very nature of the Church. It demands of individuals and churches a giving, which comes not out of what they have, but what they are. Diakonia constantly has to challenge the frozen, static, self-centred structures of the Church and transform them into living instruments of the sharing, healing ministry of the Church. Diakonia cannot be confined within the institutional framework. It should transcend the established structures and boundaries of the institutional church and become the sharing and healing action of the Holy Spirit through the community of God’s people in and for the world.’ This search for a more holistic expression of diakonia would be articulated in two major world consultations during this period.

### **Diakonia 2000: The Larnaca Consultation**

In 1986 a major world consultation 'Diakonia 2000: Called to be Neighbours', was organised in Larnaca by CICARWS, and proposed new directions and a new agenda for the Commission.<sup>5</sup> Recognising the need for a coherent theology to serve as a framework for dialogue and common action, Larnaca followed the lead of the Vancouver Assembly, in finding it in the Eucharistic vision of diakonia, rooted in the life of the Trinity and in the koinonia of God, sharing life with the whole creation.

The optimism of the 1960s about the possibilities of development had given way by 1986 to a mood of frustration, and awareness that the people and the churches were losing ground in the global struggle for justice. It was against this backdrop that the Consultation took place. Out of the shared experiences of some 300 participants emerged a new vision for the future of inter-church aid, refugee and world service. There was relatively little direct discussion of development or projects. The language of the Consultation at Larnaca is rather that of 'prophetic diakonia', of solidarity with the people in their struggle for justice, human dignity and peace.

Larnaca broadened the meaning of diakonia to include forms of help beyond the purely material. The new diakonia became more comprehensive and holistic, taking into account less obvious needs than money and other tangible assets. It stressed the importance of the local church as the main agent of Christian service. Diakonia should focus on people at the local level, but remain aware of the global links between peoples. It would become more prophetic by denouncing injustice and embodying new models of sharing resources. It would reach out to all the marginalized in a spirit of solidarity, primarily by means of the local church, which was affirmed as the main agent of this new concept of service.

As a result, CICARWS became more pro-active in helping churches and related groups to reflect on the root causes of problems and devise ways of responding more comprehensively to the needs of people. It was decided to spend less time on listing and screening specific projects for funding at Regional Group meetings and more time on analysis and reflection. However, a system of drawing up priority projects did continue in order to respond in practical ways to the priorities and challenges of the ecumenical movement.

**“It would become more prophetic by denouncing injustice and embodying new models of sharing resources.”**

**Sharing life in a world community:  
the El Escorial Consultation**

The following year, WCC convened the 'World Consultation on Koinonia: Sharing Life in a World Community,' in El Escorial, Spain (1987). Like Larnaca, 'El Escorial' as it came to be known, was strongly participatory. The delegates shared their concerns with great immediacy and took control of the proceedings in unforeseen ways. The theological concepts of diakonia and koinonia actually came into play so that participants had a sense of sharing in a living experience of what the church is about. They both centred around the conjunction of service and communion in the sense of solidarity and common commitment.

At El Escorial, there was a recognition that sharing is a universal concept which cannot be adequately expressed in formal structures. It was recognized how sharing of spiritual and material resources can be reciprocal and mutually accountable. The participants committed themselves to a 'fundamentally new value system based on justice, peace and integrity of creation'. In the same vein of realism, the participants identified the necessity of a common 'discipline' of ecumenical sharing because of the tendency of the churches and their agencies to function as individual and secular organizations. Ground rules were therefore necessary to establish clearly what the theological relationship among churches and partners should be.

The main message from El Escorial was a document called 'Guidelines for Sharing' providing a common ecumenical framework for a 'discipline of sharing among God's people'. The list of affirmations and commitments merits quotation:

We commit ourselves:

- To a fundamentally new value system...
- To the marginalized taking the centre of all decisions and actions as equal partners...
- To identifying with the poor and the oppressed and their organized movements...
- To exposing and challenging the root causes and structures of injustice...
- To enable people to organize themselves to realize their potentials...towards self-realization and self-determination

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- To mutual accountability and correction...
- To present to one another our needs and problems in mutual relationships...
- To promote the holistic mission of the church instead of disrupting and dividing by responding to one part...
- To overcome all barriers between faiths and ideologies which divide the human family...
- To resist international mechanisms which deprive the people of the South of their resources...
- To shifting the power to set priorities to those who are wrongly denied both resources and power...
- To facilitate and promote dialogue and participation among the people of the South...
- To promote and strengthen ecumenical sharing at all levels: national, regional and international.<sup>6</sup>

This commitment to ecumenical sharing is no longer tied up with the structures of the global system, but is rather an expression of 'eschatological realism'.<sup>7</sup> Theologically, it is the vision of the sharing community of the Eucharist and of the coming kingdom. The 'guidelines' for ESR rediscovered God's *oikonomia* of sharing life with humanity and the whole creation as the Creator, within the self-emptying love of Jesus and the new life given by the Holy Spirit – which was to be the theme of the WCC's Canberra Assembly in 1991.

### **From CICARWS to Sharing and Service**

The theme of the Canberra Assembly (1991) was 'Come Holy Spirit: Renew the Whole Creation' echoing the emerging concern with justice, peace and integrity of creation. It reaffirmed the messages of Larnaca and El Escorial which called for *diakonia* to reflect the need for liberation and social transformation especially where human rights are habitually violated.

Canberra renewed its commitment to the El Escorial guidelines for sharing. The Assembly also received and adopted the proposals for a major restructuring of the Council. These were approved, and resulted in CICARWS becoming one of four programme units. These programme units were each designed to be organizing centres for major themes within the Council's work, but also to be financially self sufficient.

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**“The WCC programme on sharing and service assists member churches and related ecumenical agencies and organizations to promote human dignity and sustainable community with the marginalized and excluded.”**

CICARWS, now named Unit IV – Sharing and Service, set about this task by presenting its work to agencies and churches within a new framework. The vision and mandate of the unit was described in holistic terms consistent with the recommendations from Larnaca: ‘The WCC programme on sharing and service assists member churches and related ecumenical agencies and organizations to promote human dignity and sustainable community with the marginalized and excluded’. The language, logic and spirit of the unit on sharing and service was less concerned with defending the word diakonia than with showing that the main themes and concerns of the Council needed to find practical expression at all levels of ecumenical life – on the local, regional and global levels.

Each WCC area desk sought to work in co-operation with the regional resource sharing groups to give practical expression to these aims. The refugee and migration team, the emergency desk (later ACT International), the human resources desk and the Ecumenical Church Loan Fund (ECLOF, a specialized micro-credit unit of the WCC) all sought to co-operate with the area desks within this framework.

### **Discerning the way together**

Despite the important developments in reflection about ecumenical diakonia, there was also a growing recognition during this period of the persistence of poverty in the world, and therefore of the failure of traditional approaches to development. In 1992 a group of four ecumenical development agencies<sup>8</sup> initiated a process of reflection and discussion about their work and its direction. Although the process was carried out primarily by agency staff, it also involved representatives of national councils of churches from the South and WCC’s Commission on the Churches’ Participation in Development (CCPD).

The conclusions of the ‘Discerning the Way Together’ process on issues such as poverty in the North, gender, education, health, agriculture and population do not amount to a single, unified vision of the future, its goals or strategies, but they do address the unfinished agenda of the wider ecumenical family in areas such as partnership, empowerment and theology. This important process of reflection also signalled that WCC was no longer the only space for reflection on ecumenical diakonia and development.

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### Refining the focus and instruments of ecumenical sharing

In response to the concern among some ecumenical partners about WCC's capacity in the area of development, during the 1990s, WCC Unit IV sought to refine its instruments of ecumenical sharing deployed in the regions through a series of strategic reviews. Three major initiatives at this time were a review of the ecumenical round tables, reorganizing the WCC emergency response system, and re-launching the refugee service as the Council's ministry with refugees or 'uprooted people'.

### Ecumenical round tables

Round tables (RTs) are mechanisms for ecumenical sharing established by CCPD and later facilitated by the CICARWS area secretaries. Originally, the round tables were conceived of as a holistic framework, usually at the national level, which allowed churches and ecumenical structures, Northern funding agencies and the WCC to develop a more comprehensive approach to partnership and strategic programming.

Over the years, the limitations of these ecumenical platforms, which numbered up to fifty by the 1990s, had become more increasingly apparent. In 1994, WCC initiated an independent review of the round table system. The review confirmed the importance of most of the round tables as a mechanism for enabling quality reflection and planning to be done to be achieved between churches and ecumenical partners, and suggested a number of changes and developments to strengthen the approach.

The longest running round tables were in Asia and Africa, whilst the newest were in Eastern Europe, where the collapse of the Soviet system had opened up new opportunities for concerted ecumenical action. Ecumenical efforts in Albania, Belarus, Russia, Armenia and the former Yugoslavia were facilitated through round tables or equivalent ecumenical consortia. Renewed involvement in post-communist Europe also signalled the return of ecumenical diakonia to the region where it began. In many contexts the round tables replaced the project system and its weaknesses which had been identified during the 1970s by strengthening participatory and devolved decision-making.

**“Renewed involvement in post-communist Europe also signalled the return of ecumenical diakonia to the region where it began.”**

## WCC Diakonia & Solidarity

### **Emergency relief: ACT International**

A review of WCC's emergency relief work was undertaken in 1993, with far-reaching findings. The involvement of WCC in emergency relief programmes remained an essential commitment alongside the ecumenical efforts to overcome the root causes that often created or aggravated humanitarian crises. The review confirmed that due to the growth in the number and visibility of humanitarian crises, the WCC's ecumenical emergency response system had become unwieldy and unsustainable. Following extensive consultation, a radically new structure was established in the form of ACT International (Action by Churches Together). This new ecumenical emergency coordination office was jointly sponsored by WCC and its member churches, together with the Lutheran World Federation and the ecumenical development agencies. Through ACT International the visibility of the churches was strengthened, not by a plethora of confessional labels, but by a single common identity: ACT. Still more importantly, ACT International improved the speed and capacity of response to emergencies throughout the world, in relation to emerging needs and secular humanitarian standards, through the pooling of expertise and resources in a specialized and effective organization. This evolution may seem far from the 'churches helping churches' image that Visser't Hooft had spoken of, and yet it was consistent with his pioneering spirit. It was a risky experiment intended to fashion a global emergency response system commensurate with the needs of a new century.

### **Solidarity with the uprooted: the church of the stranger**

As we have seen, the concern for refugees has been at the centre of the ecumenical agenda in the field of aid from the start. Indeed, they were one of the main reasons for beginning this involvement. To coincide with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WCC refugee service, in 1995 the WCC central committee adopted a major new policy statement entitled, 'A Moment to Choose: Risking to Be with Uprooted People'. The definition of uprooted people was deliberately inclusive, and covered refugees, internally displaced, economic migrants and political asylum-seekers forced to leave their homes'. This new policy of the member churches on uprooted people

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provided staff with a framework to seek new ways of working with the churches internationally. The emphasis moved categorically away from the 'caseload' response approach and embraced wholeheartedly a revitalized and proactive networking and advocacy function.

These three reviews brought changes to the global systems of sharing and service, which had been anticipated for some time. The hope was that the new approaches would give tangible expression to some of the recommendations raised both in Larnaca and El Escorial in favour of creating more just and sustainable communities, through a transparent and effective sharing of resources; material, cultural, spiritual and financial. A new framework would emerge to echo the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WCC's involvement in ecumenical diakonia: that of jubilee.

**“The theme of jubilee therefore seemed highly appropriate as WCC marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its diaconal service in 1994.”**

## **Towards jubilee: 50 years of sharing and service in WCC**

Jubilee is a biblical idea, outlined in Leviticus 25. The jubilee required the Israelites to take practical steps to see to it that, periodically nature got a rest (through unharvested crops) and the poorest got a chance to be free of their debts. Jubilee was about social justice, redressing the balance between rich and poor, redistribution of property. The 'jubilee year' is the 50<sup>th</sup> year after seven 'weeks' of years: seven times seven plus one. As far as scholars know, it was never put into practice, although Jesus certainly refers to it as 'the year of the Lord's favour' in his inaugural sermon (Luke 4). The vision of a jubilee, of a fairer world, where injustice is put right and crushing poverty is alleviated, inspired the founders of the WCC and many of the ecumenical bodies established in the aftermath of the Second World War. The theme of jubilee therefore seemed highly appropriate as WCC marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its diaconal service in 1994.

At the WCC Central Committee meeting held in Geneva in November 1996 the Unit IV Commission presented a concept paper on sharing and solidarity called 'Strategy for Jubilee'. This paper sought to relocate the work of diakonia at the heart of the Council, precisely in the way Visser't Hooft had foreseen it. Its wording shows how far inter-church aid and diaconal reflection have moved over fifty years. The work has evolved as understanding has grown and as circumstances and needs have changed. Welcoming the new strategy, the WCC Central Committee saw the future work of sharing and service in terms of ensuring that the many and varied resources of the churches and their agencies 'are brought

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together, not only into a well-coordinated programme of practical church action, but also into a global strategy for change'.<sup>9</sup>

### **Jubilee people**

Echoing the Beatitudes, the jubilee strategy upheld the need for WCC to focus its work on the most marginalized 'jubilee' people: women, children, uprooted and the excluded. WCC recognized a significant gap between the churches' commitment to women and practical actions of solidarity with women. Guidelines were adopted to assist staff within the unit to raise pertinent questions in their daily work about gender relations and to help monitor and evaluate the work being done towards greater gender equity. Over the next three years these guidelines were introduced at various regional and national meetings.

A second central element of the jubilee strategy was support of children's rights through the building of a global network of exploited and marginalized children. The WCC at this time was almost unique among international organizations seeking to include children in its advocacy work and in its recognition of the potential of children as leaders addressing their own problems.

### **Diakonia and a culture of peace**

Emboldened by the success of the ecumenical struggle against apartheid, the WCC Central Committee meeting in Johannesburg (1994) was challenged by the South African Methodist Bishop Stanley Mogoba to consider whether, 'having contributed so much to overcoming apartheid, the time is now right to create a programme to overcome violence'. This challenge was taken up by the WCC Assembly in Harare (1998) with the commitment to launch an ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV). The Ecumenical Decade seeks to encourage the churches to shift peacemaking from the periphery to the centre of their vocation. A key concern of the ecumenical movement at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century therefore is to offer an alternative vision to the culture of violence which dominates so much of modern life. This goal has far reaching consequences for the churches' diaconal ministry. How can the churches express the spirit, logic and language of a culture of peace in their service in the midst of violent communities?

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### **From Regional Relations to Diakonia and Solidarity**

After the 1998 Assembly, WCC undertook a further restructuring, breaking down the unit structure into inter-related programmatic teams. Unit IV-Sharing and Service was reconfigured and renamed Regional Relations and Ecumenical Sharing. The revised nomination expressed a fundamental break with any operational involvement of WCC, and a shift towards facilitation, coordination and networking functions of the Geneva staff. It also reflected the growing emphasis on WCC as a relational and not a programmatic (or funding) organization, enabling community and 'visible unity' among the churches, in line with the policy statement on the Common Vision and Understanding and Vision of WCC. One important emerging focus during this period was on the capacity building of ecumenical organizations, understood as more than technical strengthening of organizations, but as real empowerment on the level of autonomous reflection, decision-making and action. The coordination of the ecumenical round tables also continued to form an important element of WCC's diaconal work. Project work continued in a greatly diminished form through 'multilateral sharing' and through the management of a Strategic Initiative Fund. Programmatic links were maintained with ACT International and ECLOF, which had by this time received the status of autonomous organizations. In 2002, WCC consolidated its diaconal work in a new team, Diakonia and Solidarity, combining the regional desks with the refugee and migration service. One of the major pressures during the most recent period has been on the financial and human resources of the Council in the area of diakonia, raising the question of the role and long-term viability of WCC in this part of its constitutional mandate.

**“In 2002, WCC consolidated its diaconal work in a new team, Diakonia and Solidarity, combining the regional desks with the refugee and migration service.”**

### **Conclusion**

Christians have been involved in practical service to those in need from the time of the Apostles. But the large-scale, international and ecumenical involvement of churches in development cooperation and relief commenced in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and remains, in many ways, in a pioneering stage. As this brief historical overview has shown, understandings of diakonia have been shaped both by the changing world situation and by the ecumenical movement's response to

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**“If it proves possible to act in a truly (brotherly) fashion in this realm, the ecumenical movement will be shown to exist as a living organism.”**

these changes. From an original focus on inter-church aid to current expressions of practical solidarity, the churches have sought to give practical expression to the values and convictions that inform and transform local worshipping communities.

The history of ecumenical diakonia in the WCC has certainly not been without its controversies, struggles and challenges. It has however always been the reflection, however limited, of the authentic desire of a renewed discipleship on the part of Christians involved in the ecumenical movement, challenging and confronting the injustices, suffering and oppression of the world. In this way, the experience of ecumenical diakonia in WCC has been truly prophetic, and has served as a spiritual and material resource for the broader ecumenical family.

In the foundational document on inter-church aid presented to the inaugural meeting of the central committee of the WCC, the General Secretary Visser't Hooft observed that the way the churches act in this field of mutual assistance would become the test of the reality of the ecumenical movement. 'If it proves possible to act in a truly (brotherly) fashion in this realm, the ecumenical movement will be shown to exist as a living organism. If, however, denominational and confessional individualism triumphs', he noted, 'the ecumenical movement will be shown to be a matter of theory'.<sup>10</sup> These words remain of particular relevance as the ecumenical movement seeks its own renewal.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Slack, ed., *Hope in the Desert*, Geneva, WCC, 1986, p.9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> M. Taylor, *Not Angels but Agencies: the Ecumenical Response to Poverty – A Primer*, Geneva, WCC, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. Georges Tsetsis, 'An Orthodox Approach to Diaconia', *Orthodox Thought: Reports of Orthodox Consultations organized by the World Council of Churches 1975-1982*, Geneva, WCC, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Ed. K. Poser, *Diakonia 2000: Called to be Neighbours. Official Report, Larnaca Consultation 1986*, Geneva, WCC, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> This summary and the full text of the Guidelines given in: Ed. H. van Beek, *Sharing Life: Official Report of the WCC World Consultation on Koinonia: Sharing Life in a World Community, El Escorial, Spain, October 1987*, Geneva, WCC, 1989, p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> M. Robra, 'Theological and Biblical Reflection on Diaconia', *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 46, No. 3, July 1994, p. 276.

<sup>8</sup> Bread for the World and EZE (Germany), ICCO (Netherlands) and Christian Aid (UK).

<sup>9</sup> Minutes of the WCC Central Committee Meeting, 1994, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> Ed. K. Slack, *Hope in the Desert*, Geneva, WCC, 1986, p.10.