WORKING WITH THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

The Revd Matthew Z. Ross

Between May 2018 and June 2023, I served as the Programme Executive for Diakonia and Capacity Building with the World Council of Churches (WCC), based at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva.

The WCC's first General Secretary, the Rev Dr Willem Visser 't Hooft, was appointed in 1938 to lead the World Council of Churches in formation – with the actual foundation being delayed until 1948 due to the Second World War. Diaconal care of wartime refugees was a high priority for the nascent organisation. The Church of Scotland was one of the 147 founders; membership now stands at over 350 churches.

The WCC is led by a General Secretary, currently the Rev Prof Dr Jerry Pillay from South Africa. The eight-yearly Assembly, most recently held in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2022, is the highest decision-making body, with meetings of the Central Committee every two years and Executive Committee several times annually.

Working at the WCC

Most of the staff are based in Geneva, with smaller numbers in Nairobi, the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey (near Geneva), Jerusalem and New York, plus some consultants working from home in countries ranging from Sweden to South Africa. Working with such bright, motivated and experienced colleagues from around the world was an immense privilege; the working environment is akin to a university. The opportunity to discuss ideas and develop collaborative projects made for a stimulating working environment. The working language is English, but French, German and Spanish are also official languages of the WCC. The official language of Geneva is French: I needed to pass an exam in spoken and written French to secure the renewal of my Swiss work permit.

The Ecumenical Centre in Geneva is a 1960s modernist structure largely built from concrete, with a notable entrance hall, chapel and the Visser 't Hooft Hall – all of which will be retained when the current office wings are demolished and replaced in 2024-26. New buildings on the current site, as

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part of the 'Green Village' project, is currently under construction – with far greater environmental efficiency as well as a more intensive use of the available space to maximise rental income.

The WCC offers daily worship for staff, as well as work on liturgy and extensive preparation for worship for Assemblies and other gatherings. This includes commissioning of new prayers and hymns. The Ecumenical Prayer Cycle includes prayers for every country in the world throughout the year by rotation – it is available for congregations to use. The Programme Executive for worship life is currently the Rev Dr Mikie Roberts, a minister of the Moravian Church from Antigua who holds a PhD in liturgical studies from the University of Birmingham. We were able to work closely together, including on leading worship. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we jointly produced a video podcast on death and dying, including an interview with Tim Purves, of William Purves Funeral Directors of Edinburgh.

'Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia'

A major part of my work included the production and editing of the 140-page study document 'Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia'. This was the culmination of eight years of research on church-related social care. It required considerable diplomacy as well as theological, ecclesiology and diaconal understanding – an earlier draft produced before I started at the WCC was rejected by a meeting of the Central Committee. I took charge of the revision process, including producing additional chapters on diakonia in confessional and geographic contexts. The document was eventually approved in 2022 in time for the 11th WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe. It has since been translated into several languages.

Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia' is a joint publication of the WCC and ACT Alliance – the global confederation of church-related development organisations (such as Christian Aid in the UK and Brot fuer die Welt in Germany). As such, it aims to clarify the theological understanding of ecumenical diakonia and to provide a common platform for acting and reflecting together for the churches and ecumenical partners worldwide. It seeks to outline the theological components of diakonia and offers practical content for those engaged in diaconal service. It is intended to be used for formation and training in ecumenical diakonia, in strengthening the institutional capacity of those involved in diakonia, and to foster dialogue

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and cooperation between churches, ecumenical partners, ACT Alliance and the WCC.

Capacity Building

The other major part of my work was organising diaconal training courses in Asia and Africa, in conjunction with the All-Africa Conference of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia. The importance of training church leaders and future church leaders in effective management, particularly in diaconal projects, is of key importance if limited resources are to be used as effectively as possible. A postgraduate theological qualification, whether at Masters or Doctoral level, is a prerequisite to senior leadership in most churches yet this does not normally include practical training in strategic planning, effective management and human resources. With donors from the Global North being ever more stringent with the use and accountability of grants, as well as the recent huge growth of churches in Sub-Saharan Africa, the need for effective planning, strategy and accountability in leadership is of critical importance.

In partnership with *Brot fuer die Welt* and local partners, the WCC was able to organise regional training seminars in countries as diverse as Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Lebanon, Mozambique, Thailand and Togo. My roles were to plan the meetings in partnership with local organisers, raising funds to make these meetings possible and lead a session of the four-day events (including on occasions in French). The opportunity to promote intercontinental learning – including bringing a management training specialist from Kenya to Thailand – showed the global dimension that the WCC is uniquely equipped to provide.

The opportunity to travel to such countries was a life-changing experience. Travelling by train from Bangkok to Chiang Mai was an experience I will never forget, as was being shown around Maputo by the General Secretary of the Christian Council of Mozambique and visiting places such as Stellenbosch, Jakarta, Cotonou and Nairobi. The Covid-19 Pandemic brought a sudden halt to international travel for staff. International air travel is both expensive and environmentally unsustainable, so Zoom has become an essential alternative – including as a valuable tool for worship. At the height of the Pandemic in early 2021 I ended up being isolated in Geneva for five months, unable to see my family in Scotland or indeed any colleagues due to the requirement to work from home. My last international trip for the WCC also resulted in

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another dose of Covid. The risk of catching tropical diseases (particularly malaria) was a persistent concern but thankfully avoided. I believe that some travel for in-person meetings remains essential – particularly in building relationships.

The Church of Scotland in continental Europe

My role with the WCC also entitled me to membership of the Church of Scotland's International Presbytery. As one of the Presbytery's few ministers not in a charge, I often led worship in different congregations. In an earlier job, working with the Conference of European Churches in Brussels, I had similar opportunities and was privileged to serve as Moderator of the former Presbytery of Europe.

Within continental Europe, the Church of Scotland's International Presbytery provides English-speaking Reformed worship through several congregations – including Geneva and Lausanne in Switzerland. The historic ties through John Knox's three years in Geneva are self-evident, but the contemporary context keeps these multinational congregations relevant. These congregations are multinational and help to keep the Church of Scotland in connection with international partners. As well as enabling worship, which is deeply appreciated by members of the congregations, they often provide important social care services in their local communities.

The importance of ecumenical engagement

The ecumenical movement, including the World Council of Churches, can count some major achievements throughout the past 75 years. These include:

- The opportunity to build closer and deeper relationships between Christians throughout the world. The sharing of resources theological, liturgical, spiritual, material and human is a vital sign of the catholicity of the Church.
- The creation of the World Council of Churches has prompted the creation of ecumenical bodies at continental and national levels, such as the All-Africa Conference of Churches and Churches Together in Britain & Ireland, with their own remits for ecumenical expression. This has also helped build relations with the Roman Catholic Church, which, although not a member of the WCC, in practice collaborates closely and is a member of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission.

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Pope Francis visited the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva during a meeting of the WCC's Central Committee in June 2018.

- The sharing of experiences from different confession backgrounds, thereby enriching others through theological reflection. As well as 'Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia', examples include the WCC's Faith and Order Commission statement on baptism, eucharist and ministry.
- The development of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the theme of which is developed each year jointly by the Faith and Order Commission with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.
- The WCC's Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) has actively been involved in efforts to bring about an end to civil conflict in Sudan, or to reunification of North and South Korea, or to the defence of human rights in Latin America. A sometimescontroversial example included the Programme to Combat Racism, which played a major role in raising international awareness of the sinful nature of Apartheid in South Africa.

Life in Geneva

In conclusion, the opportunity to live and work in Geneva was an enormous privilege and joy, but not without its challenges. Dealing with local bureaucracy was far from straightforward and the compulsory health insurance is eyewateringly expensive. I helped several new colleagues through the intricacies of obtaining a Swiss driving licence. Geneva is a beautiful city, with a public transport system so efficient and reliable that I did not need to own a car (but was a member of the Swiss 'Mobility' car rental scheme). The greatest downside was high prices, with supermarket shopping being considerably more expensive than in the UK.

As someone who enjoys train travel, the opportunity to travel extensively in Switzerland was a delight – with the Bernina railway between St Moritz and Tirano being the most scenic journey that I have ever taken. Frequent opportunities to visit neighbouring countries, especially France and Italy, were also an enormous privilege – including visits to Venice, Bologna, Turin, Milan, Florence, Lyon, Nice, Avignon, Paris and many others. Even within Geneva, the commune of Carouge (which had been part of the former

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Kingdom of Sardinia before the Napoleonic wars) retains its Italianate appearance and ambiance.

The opportunity to learn more about Switzerland and its history was fascinating. Contrasting the Zwinglian Reformation in Zürich with the Calvinist Reformation in Geneva is just one example. The modern Swiss Confederation dates from only 1848, with origins going back to 1291. Some cantons are predominantly Protestant, others Catholic, yet the aftermath of the Sonderbund civil war of 1847 showed a Swiss genius for compromise which has helped unite such a culturally and linguistically diverse country together. This facilitated the transformation of one of Europe's poorest countries into one of the world's richest – partly achieved through keeping out of wars and overcoming the geographic obstacle of the Alps through extraordinary feats of engineering, notably the Gotthard, Lötschberg and Simplon tunnels. As a confederation, the 26 Swiss cantons (of which the grandly named Republic and Canton of Geneva is one) are sovereign and autonomous in their own areas of responsibility. Wealth has brought its own problems, including serious questions over the provenance of some of this money, as well as a reliance on workers from neighbouring countries - notably the impoverished French town of Annemasse immediately adjacent to Geneva.

To anyone with an interest in and aptitude for international ecumenical relations, I would strongly encourage them to take a postgraduate course at the WCC's Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, near Geneva. This can open doors to working in ecumenical relations, including with the WCC.

Matthew Ross

is a minister of the Church of Scotland. Ordained by the Presbytery of St Andrews in 1998, he has served as a parish minister in Fife and Midlothian, with the Conference of European Churches based in Brussels, as General Secretary of Action of Churches Together in Scotland and with the World Council of Churches. He is currently locum minister at Colinton Parish Church, Edinburgh, and also working part-time as a researcher with the School of Critical Studies at the University of Glasgow.

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