



July 2012

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Hopes, Expectations and Concerns

Since the uprising in Tahrir square and the fall of the Mubarak Regime, Egypt has undoubtedly undergone an intense period of change that has reshaped the country and impacted the face of the Middle East at large. As ordinary Egyptians took to the streets to demand greater freedom and justice, we saw people uniting together under one cause, at times even risking their lives to achieve their aim.

Over time, however, it became clear that Egypt needed a vision. The foundations were shaken and what was left was an apparently chaotic lawlessness that began to overshadow the 'revolution'. During this breakdown in law and order we witnessed increased attacks on Christians, mainly Coptic. As there had previously been no attempts to bring perpetrators to justice in similar situations under the 'old regime', it seemed that aggression against Egypt's native Christian community was increasingly justified as no action was taken to prevent it.

Now that we have arrived at the point where a president has been elected through democratic means, and despite the imperfections that arise from this being the first time for Egypt to undergo this process, we have but to hope for a better future. In the lead up to the elections, Mr. Mohammed Morsi sought to allay fears and encourage Christians, as well as moderate Muslims, that his policies were not those of the Muslim Brotherhood, but policies that had the good of the people at heart, and so the people of Egypt who fought for their freedom just sixteen months ago will surely hold him to account.

What many people in Egypt are hopeful of and desire to see is equality for every Egyptian citizen, regardless of Faith and political persuasion, and a leadership that will not frustrate them, but seek to encourage Egypt to flourish in all areas where previously the former regime has failed.

We are in what I see to be a period of democratic infancy, but one that can nevertheless lead to a positive outcome if the new president is faithful to his promises. Throughout this process, we are indeed confident that God has a hand in the shaping of the land He Himself blessed with His presence, and pray for the new president as he assumes this role to serve and guide his country into this next stage of its contemporary history. [Back to top](#)

Prayers for Egypt

HG Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom, made this statement on the announcement of the new president of Egypt on 24th June 2012.

'With the announcement of Mr Mohammed Mursi as president, this signifies a new step in the continuing process of change through which Egypt has been travelling over the past sixteen months. This process has come at great cost, and after much dedication and commitment from so many, having been inspired by the faithfulness and courage of the Egyptian people, and leading some to offer even the ultimate sacrifice of their lives.

We pray that God grant him wisdom to govern Egypt and her people, and hope this heralds a smooth transition to continuing democracy, leading to positive reform and the building of a new ethos that is cohesive, instilling a sense of citizenship, ownership and responsibility into every Egyptian. This is the time for Egypt to become a nation that does not focus on a person's religious or political stance, but more on his or her contribution and accountability to a single nation state and equality before the law.

We call for an Egypt for all, one that takes into consideration the value and rights of every citizen, and pray for the new president as he takes on this responsibility. We hope that throughout his service, it is the good of the people of Egypt that will always be core to the decisions he makes at this formative stage and throughout his period in office.

Egypt is a land blessed by God, Who has promised that He will keep her and her people close to His heart, and for this reason we are confident that in the days, months and years ahead, He will continue to safeguard and protect her people and lead them to a greater good.'

Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, said the WCC has "great admiration for the courage of the younger generation which peacefully led a popular movement seeking democracy and freedom, social justice and equality in citizenship," resulting in Morsi's election. "We believe that respect for the principle of public and individual freedoms in Egypt, including political freedom, as well as freedom of thought, opinion and expression, will be an example to be followed by all other Arab countries," Tveit said. "We trust that you will guide the process through which these freedoms will be stated in laws guaranteeing their protection." [Back to top](#)

U.S. ecumenical group chooses new executive director

Leaders of Christian Churches Together in the USA, a 10-year-old network aimed at promoting inter-church collaboration, have chosen a Presbyterian ecumenical associate as their new executive director. Revd Carlos Malave, who worked for the Presbyterian Church (USA) for 11 years, said CCT is trying to adapt in the challenging realm of ecumenical relations, Religion News Service reports. The National Council of Churches and Churches Uniting in Christ,

two decades-old groups focused on church unity, have been dealing with financial and leadership woes. While scholars, such as those who gathered in April in Assisi, Italy, have grappled with what they consider an "ecumenical winter," Malave says CCT is successfully using new methods as the church adjusts to post-modernism. (Ecumenical News International)

Malave, raised in the Seventh Day Adventist church, was drawn to ecumenism while a student at Fuller Theological Seminary. "What really clicked was a church history class taught by Cecil (Mel) Robeck Jr., an Assembly of God pastor but a really strange Assembly of God pastor because he was a leading Pentecostal ecumenist," Malave recalled. "That was captivating to me, his call to work for the unity of the church."

In his first call — at First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, Calif. — Malave "started to get involved in local ecumenism" and that path eventually led him to the ecumenical relations office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). "What has been most rewarding about my time here," Malave said, "is to experience the church not as a structure but as a family, to be respected even though our theological perspectives differ."

Malave said he's also come to greatly appreciate the commitment and historical importance of the PC(USA) to church unity. "As we explore the new ways of being church with new generations, we need to keep as a strong foundation our Presbyterian ecclesiology, to respect and build on the foundations previous generations of Presbyterian ecumenists have laid for us. "Being Presbyterian," he said, "really does mean being ecumenical." [Back to top](#)

WCC underlines UN responsibility for peace in Syria

Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), has appealed to United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, requesting that the UN give "a stronger and clearer mandate" to Kofi Annan's initiative for peace in Syria.

"It is only through an inclusive multi-lateral negotiated peace process that the worst can be avoided in Syria," Tveit asserted. The loss of thousands of civilian lives can no longer be met with verbal statements and with divided positions from the international community," he wrote on behalf of the WCC. "We strongly believe that the United Nations has a primary role to play in keeping with its foundational mandate of peace making and peace building." Dr Tveit urged the UN "to strengthen the Kofi Annan initiative by maintaining it while giving it a stronger and a clearer mandate, equipping it with a political plan and a firm and clear process led by the Security Council, which will be agreed upon by the international community for the transitional period." [Back to top](#)

Overcoming frustration at Rio+20 through commitment and community

World Council of Churches (WCC) participants in the Rio+20 Conference joined a broad religious coalition in rejecting the official outcome document of the United Nations-sponsored event. "Renowned environmental scientists are saying that practically nothing happened between 1992 and 2012 in terms of public policy and global commitment," observed Professor Leonard Boff, best-selling Brazilian author and co-founder of Latin American liberation theology. He drew his conclusion near the close of the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNSCD).

Boff joined a chorus of critics who attended the UN conference and its populist counterpart, the People's Summit, held simultaneously from 20 to 22 June in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. With World Council of Churches Central Committee moderator Revd Dr Walter Altmann, Boff co-chaired a People's Summit event on "the ethical and theological basis for climate justice". Lamenting the human condition in relation to today's eco-systems, Boff confessed: "Wherever we arrive, we bring destruction and we force the other species to flee. Wherever our economic-based thought reigns, poverty, exploitation and hunger prevail."

Altmann regretted the apparent disconnect between the strategies of international organizations distilled in the UNCSO outcome document and potential resources at the local level found in religious communities and other embodiments of civil society. "There was more dialogue with civil society in 1992," recalled Altmann as he looked back to the Earth Summit that took place at Rio in that year. He stressed that religious communities have a particular vocation in responding to the crises facing our planet, exploring their spiritual and ethical dimensions.

The panel chaired by Altmann and Boff was one of 80 events at the People's Summit grouped in an ecumenical and inter-religious space designated as "Religions for Rights". Activities in this sphere offered a creative interaction among the many and varied religions of the world.

Lack of ambition cannot be justified

Dr Guillermo Kerber, the WCC programme executive in the area of Care for Creation and Climate Justice, reinforced the conclusion of religious partners in refusing to accept the final document of Rio+20 as an effective instrument of change. "The outcome document of Rio+20", he said, "does not reflect the urgency of threats to life on earth as presented by the scientific community. It fails to update previous commitments of the international community,

especially those in the Rio 1992 Conventions regarding biodiversity, desertification and climate change. There are no new, concrete commitments for the future.”

He provided this critique of the document: “The WCC has advocated for a principle-based preamble with clear ethical grounding. The present ‘vision’ of the text falls short in this regard. The international community, having been unable to reach a consensus, opted for the lowest common denominator, avoiding any controversial issues. As a result, the earth loses, and the poor and vulnerable lose.” Kerber dismissed the document’s cautious approach: “Arguments used to justify the lack of ambition in the document, like the financial and economic crises, are unacceptable from the WCC perspective.”

During the conference, representatives of the People’s Summit met with UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon to express their frustration with the final document of Rio+20. Rafael Soares de Oliveira, executive director of the ecumenical service organization Koinonia, which is a member of the ACT Alliance, said of the encounter with Ban Ki-moon: “The meeting represented a concrete challenge to the leader of the UN regarding its agenda for the future. The People’s Summit did not accept the final document of Rio+20 as an effective instrument of change.”

Need for public theology

Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, Germany, was among the speakers who continued to encourage people of faith to dedicate themselves to the struggle against environmental deterioration. He said that “religions reach the minds and the hearts of people. Therefore, what we need is a public theology that is developed both in religious and secular languages.” Bedford-Strohm pointed to two elements that, in his opinion, are essential to change the world: inspiration and incentive. “I’m not so pessimistic,” said the bishop. “We as religions have so much to offer.”

Revd Dr Nestor Paulo Friedrich, president of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB), added, “What we saw here in Rio shows that the distance between the UNCSD and the People’s Summit reflects an urgent need to increase the participation of civil society in the global dialogue.” A young Muslim leader, Soher El Sukaria, secretary of the Muslim Arab Society of Cordoba, Argentina and co-coordinator of Religions for Peace Latin America and Caribbean Youth Network, stressed the common struggle of religions in protecting the environment and empowering the poor. And at the end of the panel, Michael Slaby, on behalf of Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp, presented the inter-religious statement: “Towards Rio+20 and beyond – a turning point in earth history,” a text which already has been signed by many religious leaders and organizations.

The World Council of Churches, through its Care for Creation and Climate Justice Programme, will continue to advocate at the UN debate concerning sustainable development, environment and climate change-related issues. The WCC is also committed to continue its participation in the movement that organized the People’s Summit. [Back to top](#)

WCC forum issues a call to promote “economy of life”

On 22 June, the World Council of Churches (WCC) Global Forum on Poverty, Wealth and Ecology concluded with a strong call for action to evolve “transformative congregations” with moral courage to build an “economy of life” that focuses on eradicating poverty, challenging wealth accumulation and safeguarding ecological integrity. The forum took place in Bogor, Indonesia, with more than one hundred participants from around the world. The call for action is an outcome of the AGAPE (Alternative to Economic Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth) study process which analyzed the relations between poverty, wealth and ecology, undertaken in Africa in 2007, Latin America and the Caribbean in 2008, Asia and the Pacific in 2009, Europe in 2010 and North America in 2011.

The statement has been developed at the forum and will make a contribution to the upcoming 10th Assembly of the WCC and its theme, “God of life, lead us to justice and peace”. The assembly will take place next year in Busan, Korea. “An economy of life is not only possible, it is in the making, and justice lies at its very foundation,” reads the statement. “The shaping of an economy of life will entail a range of strategies and methodologies, including, but not limited to: critical self-reflection and radical spiritual renewal, rights based approaches, the creation and multiplication of spaces for the voices of the marginalized.” As part of a theological affirmation, the statement points out that “greed and injustice are the root causes of the intertwined crises.” It goes on to say, that the “crisis is therefore a deep moral and existential one. The challenges that are posed are not first and foremost technological and financial, but ethical and spiritual.”

The WCC general secretary Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, who has just returned from his visit to the churches in Papua, expressed gratitude to forum participants for their contribution to the statement. “You have raised significant issues in the AGAPE study process. Now it is time to move to action which is relevant, strategic, inclusive and effective. And this action should be based on the understanding that the studies have brought forth,” said Tveit. “With AGAPE studies, we are now better equipped to pray for justice and peace,” he added.

The forum was organized by the WCC programme for Poverty, Wealth and Ecology, and hosted by the WCC member churches in Indonesia, including Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP), Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), Urban Community Mission Jakarta (PMK-HKBP) and Indonesia Christian Church (GKI-West Java regional synod).

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Dutch Churches agreement on Baptism

A top Dutch ecumenist has urged European churches to respond to secularization by "coming closer together" after local churches signed an agreement recognizing each other's baptisms. "We're living in secularized societies, where the presence of non-Christian faiths is growing but many people have little understanding of religion," said Klaas van der Kamp, secretary-general of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands. "This should naturally bring us closer, as we focus on our essential relationship with God, who brings us together through baptism. A generation ago, when all countries had a Christian majority, such impulses were not so strong," he added.

The Churches of the Netherlands have made this Joint Declaration on Baptism

We accept baptism to be a sacred sign, entrusted to us by Christ, which binds us with Him and with each other. However differently we may think on various points, on this we are one: baptism is a token of God's grace, which allows us to share in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6:3-4), and which brings us to new life. Those who receive this holy sign may regard themselves as members of Christ's Church universal and eternal. So, they are one in the Spirit, and have become one Body (1 Cor 12:13).

We confess that the history of the practice and theology of baptism has also been one of conflict. To date, different perspectives on baptism keep some churches apart. Mutual recognition of baptism begins when believers of divergent traditions share their faith stories and acknowledge the work of the Spirit in their different baptismal practices.

We, the undersigned churches¹, fully recognize each baptism which, in faith and obedience to the commission of Jesus (Matt 28:19), is solemnised in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and which, within a given faith community and following its authorized procedures, is administered with water. A baptism, so solemnized and received, is administered once and is unrepeatable.

In signing, we confirm that we recognize as valid baptisms administered in other signatory churches, provided they fulfil the criteria stated above. The baptismal form may vary: in some instances, full immersion in water may be practiced, in others, pouring or individual sprinkling.

We also, of course, recognize baptisms administered in churches who have not signed this declaration, if said baptisms are performed according to the aforementioned criteria. We cordially invite churches and Christian faith communities who have not yet signed this common statement to do so.

We heartily rejoice in each person who is baptized, yet realize that God's grace is not confined to this single sacrament or holy sign. We acknowledge hereby also our brothers and sisters, who belong to faith communities which stand within the Christian tradition, yet do not practice baptism.

This mutual recognition of baptism is an expression of our conviction that Jesus Christ is the foundation of our unity (Gal 3:27-28). We profess, in accordance with the Baptism Eucharist and Ministry text drawn up by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (Lima, 1982, §6), that one baptism in Christ is 'a call to the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship'.

They also, together with The General Baptist Society and The United Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches, made a second Declaration of their Rapprochement on Baptism

Baptism can be considered the pre-eminent sacramental sign that binds Christian churches together. Nevertheless, the history of the theology and practice of baptism has also been one of severe tensions. Some continue into our time. It remains difficult to overcome differences between churches that only recognize the baptism of those able to profess their faith (adult baptism, or 'believer's baptism') and churches that practice, sometimes almost exclusively, infant baptism. This became apparent in the course of the Council of Churches' Baptism Exploration and Recognition Project talks. Nonetheless, we, the signatories to this declaration, representing churches on both sides of the debate, have come closer together.

¹ *The Anglican Church in the Netherlands, The Federation of Free Evangelical Churches, The Moravian Church in the Netherlands, The Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands, The Moluccan Protestant Church, The Protestant Church in the Netherlands, The Remonstrant Brotherhood, The Roman Catholic Church Province in the Netherlands, and The Syrian Orthodox Church in the Netherlands.*

Historical Background

With regard to the biblical background: we endorse, following the statement on baptism of the Faith & Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, that 'baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents' (Lima 1982, §11). Certainly, from the earliest days of the Christendom, children were also baptised. Usually, an entire household was baptised alongside the one who had converted to the new faith and had undergone baptism. So it centred primarily on the faith confession and baptism of that convert. Only in the course of later centuries did infant baptism gain prominence: children could not be left under the curse of sin and death, and baptism was understood to be the sacrament of forgiveness and renewal. But also the self-evident connection between church and society in the 'corpus christianum' played a role therein.

And so infant baptism became the dominant pattern. The moments of baptism and of a personal confession of the faith became separate and distinct ones along life's path. Part of the Reformation movement, particularly the Anabaptists and Mennonites, wished to return to the 'best attested' biblical practice, baptism on the basis of a personal testimony. This was regarded as purer: baptism not as a standardized element of incorporation into the Church but as a validation of a personal, conscious choice for Christ.

Two traditions emerged alongside each other: that of infant baptism and that of adult baptism. What is more, they were often opposed each other, as practically mutually exclusive. This clash has caused much pain and embarrassment. How can we begin to overcome it? Rapprochement between these traditions begins with recognizing that we have a common problem, the bitter fruit of centuries of church history.

Growing Mutual Appreciation

In our discussions it became clear that for both standpoints – adult baptism and infant baptism – much could be said. Those who hold to 'believer's baptism' (Mennonites, Baptists, Evangelical Christians) accept that quite valid ideas underlie the practice of infant baptism. The thinking that it is God who chooses us and not we who choose God is attested in a ritual which precedes and anticipates the moment where one is capable of choosing for oneself. The desire to mark, in a powerful and sacramental way, that God has blessed a child, was deemed quite legitimate by those committed to adult baptism; equally, the desire of parents to give expression to their gratitude for the gift of new life. Therefore one sees, frequently in (Ana)Baptist circles, in the place of infant baptism, another rite of 'entry' into life, the 'dedication of a child': a child is dedicated to God and receives a blessing; words of gratitude are spoken for this gift; the parents promise to raise their child with love and in the faith.

On the other hand, those who come from churches which (mainly) practice infant baptism recognize that baptism and the confession of faith are fundamentally related. This is made quite explicit in 'believer's baptism.' There is, of course, also a confessional quality in infant baptism: such a baptism presupposes the profession of faith of the parents and the faith community. Furthermore, a child's baptism anticipates subsequent steps of catechesis, confirmation and a conscious entry into church membership. Still, those who hold to infant baptism must admit that sometimes these 'subsequent steps' are never taken and that there is often little or no explicit affirmation of the infant baptism previously received. Adult baptism holds the aspects of baptism and profession of faith together in an enviable way! No wonder that in churches which practice infant baptism, members often express regret that they had no say in their own baptisms, and therefore request, on their own confirmation or entry into church membership, to be baptised.

Lifelong Growth

Mutual appreciation of the relative merits of both baptismal practices is increasing. Moreover, on both sides there is a growing conviction that the baptism cannot be confined to any single moment, but is part of lifelong growth in Christ (Lima, §9). Infant baptism is the starting point on a pathway, upon which many steps follow, in the process of appropriating the faith. Adult baptism is associated with a definite confessional moment, but assumes a prior period of 'growth toward it', and also a continuation of growth in faith thereafter. This image of a lifelong faith journey puts the sometimes exaggerated contrast between the two positions into perspective. According to a report of the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, the pattern of baptismal initiation involves three elements: catechetical formation, baptism with water, and participation in the life of the church. These elements are present in the lifelong process of becoming Christian (JWG, Eighth Report 2005, Baptism, §52).

Unrepeatable?

In most churches, baptism is regarded as a sacrament of sign that a person can receive only once: it is unrepeatable. Occasionally, this unrepeatability is called into question. As noted above, some, in churches where infant baptism is the norm, regret that they could not make the conscious choice to undergo this most significant ritual of 'incorporation into the church of Christ.' The question of whether one can be baptised again repeatedly emerges when candidates prepare for confirmation or reception into the church. In contemporary

western culture, where so much emphasis is placed on personal experience, such demands have grown in strength. Churches which hold to a single and unrepeatable infant baptism now seek to meet these concerns by giving greater attention to moments and rituals of baptismal renewal and remembrance. This effort is not about repetition of baptism but about recalling one's original baptism and being reminded again of its significance.

The request to be re-baptised is also, of course, regularly raised in the 'believer's baptising', or 'baptising' churches [1]. It arises frequently when someone who was baptised as a child becomes a member of such a church. Among the 'baptising churches' which took part in this exploration of baptism, there is an appreciation of how such re-baptism remains a sensitive issue for their sister churches committed to infant baptism. They therefore pledge to exercise prudence. The 'baptising churches' cannot and do not want yet to move to a general acceptance of infant baptism. But in a certain number of their congregations, if a person baptised as an infant joins, re-baptism is not required. In a number of congregations, belonging to these 'baptising churches', experience is being gained with a form of 'open membership': where membership had previously been strictly tied to a 'believer's baptism,' now those who had been baptised as children, but who have strong misgivings against being re-baptised, are allowed to be full participants in the life of the church communities. Further reflection on such forms of open membership seems of importance for the future.

In 'baptising churches,' sometimes the request for a new baptism is considered to be quite legitimate. When someone baptised as a child, upon transferring to a baptising church, expresses a desire to be baptised on their admission to a church, there may be pastoral reasons to grant this wish. A decision in such cases deserves thorough preliminary pastoral investigation. The 'baptising church' informs the church where the believer in question was a member, and so makes an attempt to corroborate whether a sincere, conscientious decision was made.

Is baptism necessary?

'Baptism can be considered the pre-eminent sacramental sign that binds Christian churches together': so we began this declaration. Most churches share the conviction that baptism is an indispensable seal upon one's belonging to Christ's Church. Churches that consider this virtually self-evident nonetheless recognize that there are faith communities that do not observe this sacrament and yet wish firmly to stand in the Christian tradition (the Salvation Army, the Society of Friends). There are also churches, such as the Remonstrant Brotherhood, which accept baptism as 'the sign of incorporation into the Church of Christ', yet nonetheless do not see it as a strict precondition for membership (here, too, we may speak of a form of 'open membership'). All this calls us to keep in mind that God's mercy transcends the sacrament of baptism alone.

One Spirit and One Baptism

There is a marked rapprochement between churches, notably between those churches that practice infant baptism and churches of the (ana)baptist tradition(s). We, the faith communities involved in this process of exploring baptism, note this with gratitude and joy. We hope, through further broadly ecumenical or bilateral contact, to continue to discover, more and more, that it is the one Spirit that works in the various baptismal practices, with all their strengths and weaknesses, and guides us along old and familiar paths but also, sometimes, on new and surprising ones. [*Back to top*](#)

WCC meeting in China looks at changing demography of Christianity

"The growing church in the People's Republic of China today presents four characteristics: independent and autonomous, post-denominational, fast growing and faced with lots of challenges and emerging difficulties," said the Revd Gao Feng, president of the China Christian Council (CCC), in a speech in China on 14 June. Feng was speaking at the 51st meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) being held in Nanjing. This is the first officially sanctioned WCC and CCC sponsored meeting held in China since the formation of the WCC in 1948.

Speaking on the topic of the "Church in China Today" at a seminar on "Understanding China" he said "the demographic situation of Christianity is fast changing; however, there are more challenges that we also are faced with. Many grassroots churches don't have ordained pastors," he said. "Lay leaders who manage churches and preach on Sundays may not have formal theological education; seminaries lack faculty members and library resources. The changes in the religious policies of the Chinese government after the cultural revolution, especially since the early 1980s, have helped the reopening of churches, setting up new seminaries and reopening old ones and printing Bibles."

In a separate session of the seminar on the role of religion in creating a harmonious society in China and religious policies in China, the Vice Minister for Religious Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Jiang Jianyong, said, "If there is no religious harmony, then no social harmony exists in society and it is in this context that the government recognizes and encourages the role of religions in developing a harmonious society. Policies of the Chinese government calling on religion for building a harmonious society are based on four principles: harmony within one

religion is prerequisite; interfaith harmony; harmony between religions and society for peaceful order; harmony between religions and the state." Jianyong added that China gives freedom to all religions, but expected that religion and religious activities would not interfere with affairs of the state and its administrative matters. In China, there is no predominant religion and all religions are treated equally, he said. The Chinese government believes that the "state cannot develop or extinguish any religion". Jianyong, who at the time was head of the Jiangsu Provincial State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), visited the WCC central offices in Geneva, Switzerland in 2003 as part of a delegation of SARA officials.

As part of the visit of CCIA members to China, Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC general secretary, told students and faculty of the Nanjing Theological Seminary that the "church in China is part of the body of Christ and an integral part of the global fellowship of churches around the world." During a visit to the Amity press, Tveit received the 80th million Bible printed and published in China by the Amity Foundation and the China Christian Council. [Back to top](#)

Faith Partnership Principles

The British Government and all faith communities - led by the Church of England - will work with a real sense of joint purpose in the field of overseas aid said Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell. For the first time, groups from across the faith spectrum have been brought together to sign up to new principles for collaborating with the UK Government on aid, including an agreement to work in three priority countries.

The [Faith Partnership Principles](#) paper marks a new era of understanding and cooperation between government and faith groups on global development. Faith groups are crucial to development. They offer services and support to poor people that they wouldn't otherwise be able to access or afford. They also give valuable and trusted advice to their communities. In some African countries 70% of health services are provided by faith groups.

Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell said: "Faith plays a vital role in development. Faith groups are often the first place poor people turn in times of need. They are a source of compassion, generosity and succour to many in the developing world. I am proud to be launching the Faith Partnership Principles paper today. This new partnership will see closer working and understanding between DFID and groups from across the spectrum of faiths, working towards the same common purpose."

The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams said: "I welcome the launch by the Department for International Development of its Faith Partnership Principles paper and look forward to reviewing its implementation. The distinctive contribution of faith-based organisations and faith communities in the humanitarian and development arena is increasingly recognised. I believe that there is great potential in promoting mutual understanding, critical engagement and collaborative action between governments, civil society and faith communities in promoting global justice and sustainable development."

DFID has brought together faith groups from across the spectrum to agree a new partnership. It includes:

- Identifying three priority countries to work in together. These will become examples of good practice for aid agencies and faith groups working together
- Establishing a forum to discuss issues and agree areas for joint working
- Ensuring faith groups are informed about funding opportunities, so we can ensure a diverse range of organisations make an effective contribution to development. For example, ten faith groups are now accessing DFID funding for the first time. These include: the Karuna Trust, Tearfund and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency.

The following organisations have joined a working group with the Department for International Development: CAFOD, Christian Aid, Church of England, Guru Nanak Nishkan Sewak Jatha, Lambeth Palace, Muslim Charities Forum, Progressio, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, Tearfund, Volunteer Missionary Movement, World Jewish Relief, World Vision. [Back to top](#)

Olympic Torch in Keighley

The Olympic Torch came through Keighley, Yorkshire, on Sunday 24th June at 3.40-4.00 pm. Keighley Churches Together decided to lay on a welcome on Church Green, outside Keighley Shared Church (KSC - Anglican/Methodist LEP) which was on the route.

From 2.30pm there was:

- a free barbecue, similar to 'On the Move' mission which we have held for the last few years for 3 days in the Summer half-term. This is organised by a separate ecumenical management committee. 700 beef burgers, 660 hot dogs and 146 veggie-burgers were served while a worship group from Airedale Community Church (augmented by a singer-guitarist from next door parish, St. Mark's Utleby).

- children's 'mini-Olympics' organised by Tim Roberts, St. Mark's full-time youth worker with a team from his Church.
- face-painting organised by Revd Debbie Turley, curate at St. Mark's, with volunteers from several Churches.
- craft activity for children in the Church making 200 Olympic torches organised by a member of St. Mark's, assisted by Alison Way, schools worker with Christian Links in Keighley Schools (CLiKS – an ecumenical charity which arose from Churches Together in 2003, which I chair) and volunteers from several Churches.
- laying on hands for healing was offered by the 'Healing on the Streets' team – another ecumenical group, which offers this ministry every Saturday outside Keighley bus station.
- the Salvation Army offered free tea & coffee from their emergency wagon.
- a group of young people from the SA did a puppet show at the back of the wagon.

As the torch passed the Church bells rang, thanks to a team from Oxenhope, a village 5 miles out of Keighley. They invited people up the tower afterwards, and hopefully we now have enough volunteers to start a new team in Keighley. At 4pm, after the torch had passed, 700 people stayed for an open-air service led by Revd Derek Walmsley, Vicar of St. Mark's, and Airedale Church Music Group with Revd Peter Mott of Keighley Shared Church giving the welcome and blessing.

The costs were shared by Keighley Town Council, St. Mark's for the craft materials, the SA for their wagon, and other costs from Keighley Churches Together. The gazebos were provided by St. Mark's and the Methodist Church; Gopak tables by St. Mark's, the Methodists, CLiKS and KSC. See [here](#) for photos. [Back to top](#)

Celebrating God in the ruins of Lesnes Abbey

On Pentecost Sunday, though there were no visible tongues of fire, the temperature soared and the sun beat down as a crowd of over 100 people gathered to worship God in the picturesque ruins of Lesnes Abbey in Abbey Wood. Leading the worship were the Chair of the Methodist District, the Revd Jenny Impey; the Bishop of Woolwich, the Rt Revd Michael Iprgrave; the Bishop of Rochester, the Rt Revd James Langstaff and local representatives of the Methodist Circuit.

The Revd Simon Boxall said: "Although it cannot be said that three thousand people were added to their number that day, many passers-by stopped and stared at what may have seemed a strange spectacle, but was in fact an example of a living Church gathering. The Word was clearly proclaimed through the direct reading of Scripture, and the preaching which followed. As the bread was broken, and the wine was poured and shared, there was definitely a sense of God's presence in that ancient place of worship. We were encouraged, as the theme of the Service proclaimed to Go for Gold, in the power of the Spirit."

After the service, there was time to improve the sun tan as everyone shared the picnics they had brought with them. None of those who led the worship had to rush off to other commitments, so there was time for people from the different churches to get to know each other. Simon continued: "At the original feeding of the 5,000 there was quite a mess left over, about 12 baskets of food. However, in an important act of witness those who participated in the service picked up all their rubbish, and left the site as clean as when we arrived." (first appeared in Buzz) [Back to top](#)

Receptive Ecumenism Conference at Birmingham

Professor Paul D. Murray, Professor of Systematic Theology and Director of the Centre for Catholic Studies in the Department of Theology and Religion of the University of Durham, was a keynote speaker on 21 June at a conference held at the Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, on receptive ecumenism.

He said that "compared with the high hopes and heady days following the entrance of the Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement at the Second Vatican Council, formal ecumenism has experienced a significant energy-drain over the past decade or so and has frequently found itself in a place of apparent impasse. Receptive Ecumenism offers a constructive way forwards – a way of hope – for this context. It continues to hold to and to serve the traditional concern to work for the structural and sacramental unity of the churches whilst also taking our changed situation seriously.

As pioneered through a series of international and regional projects operating out of Durham University's Department of Theology and Religion in recent years, Receptive Ecumenism proceeds by bringing to the fore the spirit of self-critical hospitality, humble learning, and on-going conversion that have always been quietly essential to good ecumenical work and turning them into the explicit required strategy and core task of contemporary ecumenism.

At the heart of Receptive Ecumenism is the conviction that further substantial progress is indeed possible on the way towards full structural and sacramental unity but only if a fundamental, counter-instinctual move is made away from traditions wishing that others could be more like themselves to instead each asking what they can and must learn, with dynamic integrity, from their respective others. This required receptive ecclesial learning is envisaged as

operating not only in relation to such things as hymnody, spirituality, and devotional practices but as extending to doctrinal self-understanding and, even more so, respective structural and organisational-cultural realities. As such, Receptive Ecumenism represents a way of ecumenical ecclesial conversion and growth that is both remarkably simple in vision and remarkably far-reaching in potential. It is offered here as the way that the Spirit is today calling the churches to walk for the sake of their own greater flourishing in and witness to the glory of communion in God."

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Pentecost taken to the community in Somerset

This has been the eighth year that local Churches Together held a Whit-Fun-Day in North East Somerset. Whit-Fun-Day usually takes place on the Somervale School Playing Field in Midsomer Norton, or in the school if it's raining. From 3pm to 6.30pm on Whit Sunday, Midsomer Norton Methodist Church provided a free afternoon of entertainment on the theme of Pentecost.

[Marjorie Gilson](#) said: "This year we had perfect blue skies and hardly a cloud to be seen till we were packing up. Over 800 folk who came through the gates to take part in various events which included: skittles, prayer tent, face painting, badge making, biscuit making, Christian bikers, three bouncy castles, ride-on model steam train, Somerset Morris Dancers, the Renewal Gospel Choir, Downside School Bagpipes, Healing on the Streets Team, Vertical Xtreme climbing wall, small animals from Bristol Zoo and various craft and game stalls."

Tea, coffee and squash were available all the afternoon as was a 'sandwich and cake' tea. Folk came and helped themselves, enjoying the Renewal Choir singing Gospel songs and leading people in worship. People also enjoyed watching a drama, singing community hymns and praying. Vernon Stokes, former Olympic Triple Jump Champion and a founder member of the Renewal Choir, spoke about his life.

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Stop blaming the poor for poverty

The Methodist Church, Baptist Union of Great Britain and United Reformed Church are accusing the Government of continuing a trend of blaming the poor as new proposals to redefine poverty are announced.

"These proposals risk further stigmatising the poor in the eyes of voters and the media," said Paul Morrison, Public Issues Adviser for the Methodist Church. "It is universally acknowledged that poverty is a relative concept. These proposals seek to undermine the idea that relative poverty matters, by focusing on other issues. At its worst it will seek to measure the 'faults' of the poor, further blaming them for poverty. We are called to stand alongside the poorest and most vulnerable in society. By focusing on issues like addiction, which only affects a tiny minority of people who are poor, the Government is blaming the poor for poverty and detracting from the real issues. Recession, low pay and decreasing benefits are driving poverty and none of these are the fault of the poor."

In 2006, Prime Minister David Cameron promised to measure poverty in relative terms, which take account of what people need to live on. But announcements made today signal a definitive shift away from this focus, with plans to measure poverty in terms of drug addiction, homelessness and unemployment, rather than income levels.

"These new measures relate more to the Government's perception of poor people than to the real scale of poverty," added Mr Morrison. "Factors like addiction are important, but they are not a measure of poverty." The Churches support the [Living Wage Campaign](#), which calls for every worker in the country to be able to earn enough to provide their family with the essentials of life.

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Governments must do more on climate change

Three major British Churches have voiced their disappointment that the Rio+20 Earth Summit has not made progress on the environmental challenges that face the global community. The Methodist Church, United Reformed Church and Baptist Union of Great Britain say that world leaders have largely repeated previous climate pledges, rather than pressing forward. They stress that the pledges in the summit document "The Future We Want" are an inadequate response to the risks posed by climate change.

"Whilst we're pleased that international leaders recognise the plight of the planet and the lives of many living in poverty, we are disappointed in the lack of clear action coming out of Rio+20," said the Revd Roberta Rominger, General Secretary of the United Reformed Church. "We welcome the \$175bn fund pledge to boost sustainable transport in developing economies," she continued. "However, developed nations must now find innovative ways to resource a Green Fund to help developing countries create low carbon economies. We also regret that the summit has declined to identify a timescale or plan of action for the phasing out of subsidies for fossil fuels."

The Revd Jonathan Edwards, General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain said, "The world is only slowly waking up to the fact that our present consumption levels are unsustainable. I believe that churches should not only

call on governments to live more sustainably, but set an example in how this can be done through reducing our carbon footprints.”

Methodist Youth President, Sam Taylor, also expressed frustration with the weakness of the Rio+20 communiqué: “Without targets and dates, it’s just words on paper. Will we be in the same position in another twenty years? The lives of future generations will be affected if we fail to act now on climate change. The final communiqué does not set out a path towards the future we want. We can and must do more.” [Back to top](#)

Food Matters Conference

This event will bring together leading theologians, policy experts and activists to grapple with vital questions about food, hunger and poverty. Presentations, discussions, workshops and worship will look at our theology of food, how we enable food security in a resource-constrained and overheating planet, who has the power over our food systems and how they are using it. We will also hear inspiring examples of ways in which these issues are being addressed by individuals, churches and agencies, and explore how we can all be part of the solution, both locally and globally.

Organised by a coalition of Christian development agencies and denominations, the conference is a unique opportunity for Christians with an interest in global poverty and justice issues to meet, share and learn. Participants will leave informed, stimulated and equipped to play their part in tackling one of the greatest challenges of our age. Join us for ‘Food Matters’, the Ecumenical World Development Conference 2012, at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire, from 1-3 October 2012. All are welcome. For more information and to book, visit www.ewdc.info [Back to top](#)

Busting the myths: An alternative manifesto for housing

At its National Conference on 13th June Housing Justice launched an alternative manifesto for housing. Housing Justice Director Alison Gelder presented the conference with 4 myths which are barriers to creating the affordable secure housing that our nation needs.

1. We don’t need to build more homes – we already have enough to go round.
2. Britain is full - there is no room for more houses
3. We can’t afford more social housing
4. Renting is always inferior to buying.

Gelder demolished these myths using evidence from the government’s own data on housing and land use as well as research by a number of independent think tanks.

Demolishing the myths she said: “The number of households is increasing at the rate of about 250,000 per year while net housing supply grew by only 121,200 last year. This gap has been growing and according to the IPPR by 2025 we will have a shortfall of about 750,000 homes. **We do need more homes.**

“The Land utilisation survey shows that only 1.1% of the land area of England is used for housing, so **there is plenty of space to build** providing we develop sensitively and with relatively high density.

“Meanwhile the cost of housing support (Local Housing Allowance / Housing Benefit) is around £23bn a year, while public spending on new social housing is only £4.5bn a year. Investing part of the £23bn into building new social housing would create jobs (in building and related trades) and the housing support bill would reduce each time someone in receipt of LHA transferred to a cheaper social or affordable tenancy. So **more social housing would both save money and boost the economy.**

On **improving the attractiveness of renting** Ms Gelder said that the answers included: “Introducing greater stability through increased security of tenure; Fair rent regulations; promoting new or existing asset classes; and a more attractive rental market would also help to stabilise house prices, reducing the compulsion to own a home as an investment asset. Churches have been prominent in the Credit Union movement; what role could churches play in developing community assets for tenants?”

She urged Housing Justice members and supporters to shout the truth about the myths from the rooftops, to promote appropriate development in their area, to lobby (nationally and locally) for fair rents, investment in social housing and improved security of tenure and conditions for private renters and to think about how to develop new asset classes to break the link between investment and housing and turn the focus back to creating the homes we need.

The Conference, called “Housing and Homelessness: Busting the Myths”, welcomed more than 80 delegates from churches and church linked housing and homelessness initiatives from across the country. Other speakers included Mark Russell of the Church Army, Linda McGowan, DCLG specialist adviser on homelessness, and John Battle, former MP for Leeds West. Workshops were presented by the National Community Land Trust Network, Triodos Bank, Green Pastures, Boaz Trust and others [Back to top](#)

Catholic Conference to explore 'China today and our Response'

Around 300 Justice and Peace campaigners from across England and Wales will gather in Derbyshire 20-22 July for their annual conference, which this year focuses on China. The title of the conference is '**A New World Order? – China today and our response**'. It is the 34th annual Conference of the National Justice & Peace Network and is organised in conjunction with Cultural Exchange with China (CEC) and Leeds Justice & Peace Commission.

As China emerges as a major player on the world stage, our need for a deeper understanding of its reality also grows. This conference will seek to: raise awareness about the economic, environmental and military role of China in the world; understand about the Church in China; and learn about the culture of the Chinese people. The conference will be chaired by Fr Eamonn O'Brien, the Columban Director of Cultural Exchange with China. Cardinal Keith O'Brien, who has visited China with Cultural Exchange with China, will celebrate Mass during the conference.

Speakers will include Xinran who was a radio journalist in China before moving to London where she wrote *The Good Women of China* (2002). Her new book, *Message From an Unknown Chinese Mother* (2010), is a collection of stories from Chinese mothers who have lost or had to abandon children. Xinran often advises the media about western relations with China, and makes frequent television and radio appearances.

John Baptist Zhang is a diocesan priest from Hebei Province, China. He and his team have been dedicated to media evangelization, social services and academic studies, so as to promote dialogue, reconciliation and cooperation within the Church in China, and between the Church and society in China.

Martin Palmer is Secretary General of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation. He has worked in the field of religions and the environment for more than 30 years and is a regular radio and television commentator, invited to speak on religious, ethical and historical issues.

Li Bingqin is a lecturer in Social Policy at the London School of Economics, a research associate of The Centre for Analyses of Social Exclusion and member of the Cities Program, both at LSE. Her current research projects include migrant housing in Chinese cities, intergenerational support in Chinese cities, and social inclusion of rural to urban migrants.

Workshops include - China in developing countries; the environment; China's development; the role of women; the Churches in China; other faith traditions in China; Chinese history and culture; the impact of Chinese buyers on the UK property market; students and young people; and human rights, plus sessions on Tai Chi and Chinese calligraphy.

Workshop leaders include Geoffrey Chongo of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection in Zambia, who will look at Chinese investment in Africa; CAFOD's Jim Simmons, who will explore the Church and HIV in China; Pax Christi's Pat Gaffney on the Arms Trade in relation to China, and Wah Piow who will address Chinese Migration to the UK.

Agencies will be displaying goods, resources, and information at a 'Just Fair' marketplace. Children and young people are a vital part of the NJPN conference. There will be a specially designed Y-KIDS Programme for 5 to 11 year olds. 12 to 18 year olds will explore the conference theme in an active and thought provoking weekend running alongside the adult programme. [Back to top](#)

Our Lady of the Wall

The Society of St John Chrysostom and the Centre for Eastern Christianity, Heythrop College, University of London, offers a presentation on The Holy Land Icon Tradition from Origins to the Future by Ian Knowles, Founder-Director of the Bethlehem Icon School.

After 25 years as an iconographer in the UK (Elias Icons), Ian's work took a new turn in 2008 when he restored the damaged wall paintings in the Orthodox Church of St Nicholas' Cave at Beit Jala. This led to commissions for icons at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Mount, at Anjara in Jordan, a new sanctuary design for the Sacred Heart Church at Naur near Amman, and saving the wall paintings at Bethlehem University Chapel. His most extraordinary commission is The Virgin Mother of the Church icon, written at the behest of local Arab Christians on the Palestinian side of the Israeli separation wall. Better known as Our Lady of the Wall, it places the Sacred amid the graffiti alongside the people's suffering, but in contrast to violence and injustice, in the hope of peace and reconciliation for all. Ian will tell this remarkable story and also bring news of the Bethlehem Icon School. Newly founded under the aegis of the Melkite Patriarchal Vicar, Archbishop Joseph Zerey in Jerusalem, with the support of Tantur Ecumenical Institute, it will ensure that the indigenous Arab Christian icon tradition, now hanging on by a thread, is preserved in a new generation.

It will be at 4.30pm on Wednesday 25th July 2012 Marie Eugenie Room, Heythrop College, University of London, Kensington Square, London W8 5HN followed by a Reception to mark the Opening of the Bethlehem Icon School. Suggested £10 donation for BIS to "Friends of the Holy Land" RSVP to johnchrysostom@btinternet.com appreciated www.orientalelumen.org.uk – www.heythrop.ac.uk – www.bethlehemiconschool.org All are welcome. [Back to top](#)