

Press conference of 3 November 2016

Address by Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary World Council of Churches

The spoken text shall prevail

Genève, ville de la Réforme, cité de la Paix

Geneva, city of the reformation, city of peace

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of more than 340 member churches and partner organizations moving together on a shared pilgrimage of justice and peace.

We welcome this traveling exhibit honouring a 500th-anniversary landmark in the history of the Reformation – the posting of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses at Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. This observance is a project in which we have been participating and support wholeheartedly.

We are proud that this exhibit is beginning its year-long pilgrimage of teaching and historical education in Geneva, a city that has welcomed the World Council of Churches since our first, preparatory offices were opened here in 1939.

Among some, especially in the circles of Reformed Protestants, Geneva is sometimes called “the city of Calvin.”

In the early years of the Reform, Geneva also began to be called “the city of refuge” as it offered shelter to French Huguenots and other oppressed minorities.

For some, Geneva is remembered as the native city of Jean-Jacques Rousseau – and an important resting place on the life journeys of Voltaire and Madame de Staëhl.

For the historically minded, Geneva is the city of Henri Dunant and a spirit of international service and peace-making. Co-recipient of the first Nobel Peace Prize, Dunant was an early champion of humanity building local fellowships that grew into such bodies as the Young Men’s Christian Association (or YMCA) and the World Student Christian Federation.

As children of the Reformation who were shaped by the life of their churches, Dunant and his generation promoted human dignity for all people. They promoted free expression without fear of oppression, and the recognition of universal human rights including the right to religious freedom.

Geneva has been home to the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the Geneva Conventions – inspired by Dunant – and then, to the League of Nations and United Nations, the International YMCA and World YWCA, as well as so many other organizations dedicated to the quest for reconciliation and peace across tribal boundaries and national borders.

As for religious division: the modern movement toward church unity has found that there is a way forward from conflict among various believers to understanding, peace, reconciliation and, in for Christians, communion. One of the strategies toward mutual understanding is commitment to dialogue which helps us affirm and explore what we have in common today.

The honouring of “500 years” of Reformation comes as a sort of numerical shorthand for symbolizing a complex series of events – as we see when we examine the Reformation Monument in Geneva. The 95 Theses advanced by Luther were part of an on-going debate that stretched back centuries, to the Waldensians, Lollards and Hussites, and that continued well beyond 1517.

For example: I am a minister of the Church of Norway which, like Geneva, officially acknowledged a theological, ecclesiastical and political Reform in 1536. In Norway, this Reformation came about by royal decree; in Geneva, it was adopted by a free vote of the city’s assembly. And the story unfolded from there, as we begin to learn from the sculpted panels in the Parc des Bastions, and as we see in the traveling exhibition we inaugurate this day.

In history, as in religious pilgrimage, one thing tends to lead to another. Controversy over reform may lead to creation of a city of refuge. The intellectual curiosity and motivation of refugees may help in the growth of a great university and cultural enrichment. A culture of conscience may give rise to great diacanal, charitable and peace-building institutions. The city of Calvin becomes the city of refuge; and the city of Dunant becomes “international Geneva” where diplomats and world leaders gather in the realistic hope of making peace for all to share.

Today, the time has come to harvest the fruits of our experience of the international, ecumenical movement and to proceed forward together as pilgrims in the way of faith, justice and peace. We are accountable to the history and ideas that are the heritage of our churches. We are mutually accountable within our common calling – to live together in the spirit of love, becoming one in our dedication to mission and service.

So welcome to the starting point of the Reformation exhibit, the city of Geneva! We invite you to participate in this caravan of discovery, continuing together in the pilgrimage of justice and peace.