

# Christian Unity in a Divided World

## An Interview with the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches

The Rev. Prof. Dr. Jerry Pillay, a Reformed theologian and pastor from South Africa, has served as general secretary of the World Council of Churches since January 2023.

***As guest speaker at the Centennial worship service, how would you sum up the relationship between the United Church and the WCC, for Canadians?***

Ecumenism has been a defining characteristic of the Canadian churches, and the United Church of Canada is one of the oldest organic unions in the ecumenical movement. Canadians and Canadian churches have always stood up for Christian unity and solidarity.

The UCC has a longstanding and active relationship with the WCC, rooted in our shared commitment to ecumenism, justice, and global Christian witness. The UCC was one of the founding members of the WCC in 1948, reflecting its dedication to Christian unity and cooperation from the outset. The church has consistently participated in WCC assemblies, commissions, and working groups. It has contributed to theological dialogues, social justice initiatives, and peace-building efforts through the WCC's global platforms. It is a vital element in the global ecumenical movement.

The UCC draws from WCC resources and statements in shaping its own policies and programs, and likewise contributes Canadian perspectives to WCC initiatives. We also collaborate on issues like climate justice, Indigenous rights, gender equality, and peace. The UCC supports the WCC's role in advocating for marginalized communities and addressing global crises.

Recently, for example, in March 2025, the UCC, alongside other Canadian churches affiliated with the WCC, issued a joint ecumenical statement addressing the escalating violence in the Middle East. The statement urged the Canadian government to support a ceasefire and a negotiated resolution to the conflict. It emphasized the importance of adhering to international humanitarian law and called for the establishment of a humanitarian corridor to provide relief to Gaza. This collaborative effort reflects the shared commitment of the UCC and the WCC to peace, justice, and the protection of human rights in conflict zones.

***Given that 2025 is the 1,700th anniversary of the first Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325, 100 years isn't all that long in the history of the church. What does Nicaea 325 have to teach us about ecumenism in 2025, and what do you wish for the United Church of Canada for its next 100 years?***

The first Ecumenical Council at Nicaea (325 CE) preeminently reminds us of the centrality of Christ. When Nicaea proclaimed Christ to be "consubstantial with the Father," it emphasized that nothing else but Christ stands at the center of our faith. That is why the church for more than a thousand years and then also the Reformers and their churches have always been able to

refer positively to the Council of Nicaea. But beyond that authoritative tradition, Nicaea has a great significance for the whole ecumenical movement, because not only churches of the Reformation but also the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches still today confess the Creed, the beginnings of which go back to the Council of Nicaea.

So when we reflect on the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea and the formulation of the Nicene Creed, we are not merely engaging with a historical relic or an ancient theological formula. We are reminded of the *living faith* it represents—a faith that testifies to the truth of Jesus Christ, the resurrected Son of God, who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed is a reminder and call to oneness in faith.

The Council at Nicaea was also the first attempt to reach consensus in the church through an assembly representing all of Christendom. This gathering inspired the modern ecumenical movement to work on issues of Faith and Order for the unity of the church and humankind. Within the global ecumenical fellowship, the Council of Nicaea reminds us how important it is for the churches to have a place where they can come together to discuss and resolve the important issues that affect everyone. Conciliarity finds its appropriate expression in mutual debate and shared reflection on common challenges. Conciliarity and Synodality are therefore of utmost importance for each of the churches and church families, but also for the ecumenical movement as a whole.

To mention yet another aspect of the rich legacy of Nicaea: For us as a global fellowship, it is particularly fascinating and inspiring to see that the Council of Nicaea did not only consist of bishops who came from within the Roman Empire. According to the ancient lists, it was also joined by delegates from regions which were far beyond the borders of the Roman world, such as Persia and, according to one source, even India. Nicaea was thus an event of global Christian dimensions.

In the end, Nicaea offers us more than a doctrinal legacy. To my mind, it confronts us with five critical invitations for today: to live out our faith in action, to journey together toward unity as a conciliar fellowship, to offer visible signs of unity through common celebrations such as Easter, to pursue justice as an integral part of that journey, and to decolonize our communities and contexts and systems. I believe that these imperatives point to ways in which we as Christians, as Christian communities, and as faith-filled actors in a hurting world, can live our faith authentically and contribute to serving and saving humanity and our planet.

With these markers of authentic contemporary faith before us, it is my wish for the church of Canada that, with Christ at its center, it continues to engage the people of God in the building of the kingdom of God as broadly and globally as the Council of Nicaea did in its day.

***What would your answer be to the question, the theme question of Nicaea 2025, “Where now for visible unity?”***

To my mind, the call for visible unity provides us with a number of important impulses: First, as mentioned, it encourages us to live our faith in active love with Christ at the center. Second, it provides the opportunity for us to be together on the journey toward unity as a conciliar

fellowship; and third, it gives us the chance to make our unity visible through common celebrations.

This year we therefore reflect upon the relevance of the Council of Nicaea within the framework of a Special Ecumenical Year commemorating not only Nicaea but also the centenary of the Stockholm Conference on Life and Work, alongside other important ecumenical dates that have shaped the common calling as a fellowship of churches.

Earlier this year the common celebration of Easter and Pentecost by Eastern and Western Christianity in 2025 gave us a foretaste of the time when all Christians will celebrate the Risen Lord on the same date. When in June the WCC central committee will meet in Johannesburg, we will also commemorate the 40th anniversary of the South African Kairos Document, which denounced apartheid from the standpoint of faith and biblical theology. The Kairos Document reminds us to pursue justice as an integral part of that journey, and at the same time makes us aware of the need for decolonizing our theologies and our lives as churches.

The same need to introduce a decolonized perspective in theological and cultural terms can be felt if we have a closer look at a certain Western narrative of Nicaea within the context of imperial Rome as well. It is therefore crucial that our meeting in October in Alexandria will be the first World Conference on Faith and Order in the global South, meeting in Egypt, on the African continent, as the “centre of gravity” of the Christian world has shifted to the southern hemisphere, namely, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Thus, Nicaea can continue to inspire our journey together in faith.

***How important is visible unity in an age when societal norms are tossed aside and international bodies are ignored and discredited? How can visible unity change/influence this?***

In a time of climate catastrophe, war, economic inequality, and receding commitment to human rights and human dignity, our visible unity is needed more than ever. As a fellowship of churches, we are not paralyzed by fear but driven by hope as pilgrims on the way toward justice, reconciliation, and unity. Our unity lends credibility to our message and advocacy, models reconciliation for a divided world, and witnesses powerfully to the love of God that we experience in Christ.

The connection between “right belief” and “right action” is essential here. The faith we proclaim must not remain in the realm of theological discourse alone. It must translate into concrete action that reflects God’s justice and compassion as we address the numerous injustices in the world, such as economic, gender, climate and digital injustices. In the words of the apostle James, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Nicaea invites us to consider ways in which *our faith comes alive through works of mercy, justice, reconciliation and peace*. It invites us to reflect on and respond to injustices here in Canada and across the world. The UCC has been and remains a leader in advocacy and action for social and climate justice.

God uses several instruments to reach and transform the world, including and especially the church. Therefore, the church needs to hear and respond to this painful cry for justice. The

mission of the church is to follow in the footsteps of proclaiming Christ's love to the world. The church needs to stand where God stands and not get mixed up with the rich and powerful. The language of love is best expressed in standing up for truth, siding with the poor, and holding out hope amid injustices and sufferings. Together we can make a difference in the world. Together we can live and fulfil God's vision for the world. Together we can say Christianity matters.

In 1993, the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order was held in Santiago de Compostela, a place of pilgrims that profoundly shaped the pilgrimage of the ecumenical movement into the 21st century. Three decades later, recalling the anniversaries of Nicaea and Stockholm can inspire and strengthen us to conform to Christ and to follow his example. Our journey toward visible unity can comfort and encourage us as a fellowship. When we speak on social and political issues, our visible unity can inspire others as well: Visible unity can call all people of good will to be co-workers in the kingdom of God. Visible unity among churches, therefore, is a powerful sign of God's healing love. This experience is at the core of Jesus's prayer in John 17:21 "that they all may be one so that the world may believe."