



Pathways to Peace Initiative
Justice, Reconciliation, and Peace –
reflecting churches' Call and Witness in times of war in Europe

Introduction – Aim

The Pathways to Peace Initiative (P2P) is designed as a coordinated response to a call for action in light of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine. The aim of P2P is to maximise the effect of European churches' response to war against Ukraine through synergy among churches and relevant partners. The P2P initiative started as a series of consultations with resource persons from Ukraine and the broader region as well as Conference of European Churches' (CEC) member churches in fall 2022 and is now in the process of developing ideas into concrete activities and projects.

Framework – the Call and Witness strategy

The Pathways to Peace initiative is in line with CEC's guiding principles and strategies of a focused advocacy impact. It aims at taking advantage of CEC as a fellowship of churches, with a concerted, coordinated effort to bring in resources from its constituency while addressing the most demanding, current political issues in Europe. It takes into account the political processes in Brussels and Strasbourg and is designed to fit within CEC's current capacities.

The Pathways to Peace initiative reaches back to the DNA of the organisation, aiming for European unity through work in the areas of justice, reconciliation and peace. This is a continued effort within the current proposal, strongly inspired by a shared CEC legacy, in line with the original role and purpose of CEC, continued beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall into the 1990s, now reinvigorated in the 2020s. European contemporary history demonstrates that this is an area that is constantly relevant for churches to address in a concerted and unified manner.

The current context

The breakout of war in Ukraine has revealed how fragile peace is. Until recently, war has been inconceivable for most of the western and northern parts of the European continent, while other parts of the continent that have experienced conflict in recent years, for instance Armenia, the Balkans, Cyprus and Northern Ireland, have been reminded of their own unreconciled wounds.

A war in the heart of Europe highlights anew the necessity of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and the importance of peace education. It also manifests the role that religion plays in this particular conflict and the need for churches to exercise their mediating and diplomatic skills. Churches in Europe have immediately reacted by re-affirming peace as an integral and indispensable element of the Christian gospel, calling on



both sides for a ceasefire, addressing church leaders in both the countries involved, exercising church diplomacy, praying for peace, and providing humanitarian aid and care for the refugees.

Since February 2022, CEC has been in regular contact with Member Churches and other churches in Ukraine. CEC also addressed the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, albeit without receiving a response. The secretariat has been following developments in Ukraine and the neighbouring countries, listening to the current experiences and realities of churches, discussing their responses to the war, hearing their hopes for the future, and bringing their voices to the European institutions.

The severity of the situation caused the CEC Presidency to require deeper engagement with the churches in the region and with CEC's extended network. A process of consultation and discernment was then initiated concerning priorities and effective planning that will allow for a concrete outcome. The immediate result was submitted to the CEC Governing Board for discussion and approval.

Consultation process

Upon approval by the Governing Board, a more extended consultation process started first with ecumenical officers of the CEC Member Churches, European National Councils of Churches, and resource persons from Ukraine and neighbouring countries. Church responses to the initial concept sent to the CEC Member Churches, referred to the relevance of the P2P Initiative.

Churches that submitted responses to the P2P initial concept referred to their support for Ukraine providing humanitarian and financial aid, and also pastoral care for Ukrainian refugees. Those who are geographically close to Ukraine underlined the urgency of the initiative and expressed their commitment to actively participate and contribute to it. The concept was also discussed with several partner organisations and resource persons.

Peace as our Christian vocation

In an increasingly complex and wounded world, churches and individual Christians, along with other communities of living faiths and people of no faith, have come to recognise that working for peace constitutes a primary expression of our common responsibility for life in the world. This responsibility is grounded on the essential goodness of all human beings and the whole of God's creation.

Peace is inextricably related to the notion of justice and freedom that God has granted to all human beings through Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit as a gift and vocation. Peace and peace-making as a gift and calling connect theology with ethical witness and social transformation. The dynamic nature of peace does not allow for passivity and the acceptance of injustice.



Work on reconciliation and peace is not a private and individualistic pursuit. The witness to and practice of peace is public; peace witness is public theology in action. Reconciliation encompasses the restoration of relationships between God and human beings, among human beings, and with the whole created world. It entails the mending and building of relationships and requires the change and transformation of social structures.

Human rights

For over twenty years, churches within the ecumenical movement have reflected on the concept of just peace. As part of this work, churches have highlighted justice as essential to the work of reconciliation and to the safeguarding of lasting peace.

Despite the scepticism concerning the nature, basis, and enforceability of human rights, the practice of justice concurs with the respect for human rights in European democratic societies, and is perceived as a requirement for human flourishing and necessary standards of human community, and as the foundation for emancipatory politics.

Since the breakout of war in Ukraine, European societies witnessed a crisis in the use of the concepts of peace, reconciliation, justice, and truth, as both countries of the conflict have appealed to them. There is a need to redefine these concepts and create a common framework to address the ongoing hostility. Churches can play a decisive role in creating a common language for communication and preparing for peace. In the face of hardships, churches are called to proclaim hope and trust in God. Developing a theology of hope and justice that responds to war ecumenically is part of our Christian vocation.

P2P Steering Group

A steering group was created to guide the activities organised under P2P with the participation of CEC member churches, resource persons from Ukraine and other partners. The group is open for interested persons from CEC Member Churches, National Councils of Churches, Organisations in Partnership, non-Member Churches and other partner organisations.

Interested individuals are required to have expertise in at least one of the following areas: Ukrainian history, Ukrainian Church history and understanding of today's context, Ukrainian-Russian relations, public theology, peace theology, peacebuilding, human rights (esp. FoRB).

CEC 2023 General Assembly

This Assembly underscored the importance of Christian unity in Europe and the understanding of church as a *koinonia of churches* for a continent that is currently experiencing war on its soil, the devastating consequences of which are apparent: humanitarian, financial, ecclesiological, ecological, ecumenical.



The shared vision of the Church as communion, calls us towards the common good of society, towards a life of abundance where, as disciples of Christ, we have the responsibility to defend the life and human dignity of all. This means, with Christ in the centre of our life, to build solidarity with one another in our globalised and plural world (*The Church – Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper no. 214).

“The Assembly condemned unequivocally Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine and the devastation of life, territory and international relationships – the violent breakdown of the post-war settlement in which the rule of law was paramount. It heard powerful witness by Ukrainian Christians directly affected by the war and a strong appeal for prayer and practical accompaniment into the future” (*Assembly message*).

Two hearings on the war in Ukraine gave a glimpse of the potential of the P2P Initiative in terms of bringing together church leaders and other Christians from Ukraine and the broader region and providing opportunities for an honest ecumenical exchange.

Pathways to Peace main objectives

Objective 1: Develop a network of church leaders, intellectuals, and academics in preparation for peace in Ukraine. With this objective CEC seeks to strengthen relationships between Ukrainians and partners, while discussing ongoing developments in Ukraine and discerning the role of churches in the process of preparation for peace.

Objective 2: Advocate for the protection of destroyed, damaged, or looted religious sites in Ukraine. This objective focuses on helping churches in Ukraine to reconstruct religious infrastructure, thus contributing to the overall goal of realising Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) for all in Ukraine. CEC will assist Ukrainian churches to apply for reconstruction funds from European sources.

Objective 3: Enhance the ecumenical vision of just peace. With this objective CEC facilitates exchange on just peace among European churches. It will increase their ability to address the rhetoric of exceptionalism, while examining links to theological justifications of war in Ukraine, enhancing the capacity of churches to theologise on war, peace, and reconciliation in an informed way.