

Ecumenical leader Agnes Abuom dies at 73

by [World Council of Churches](#)

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Agnes Abuom (Photo by Sean Hawkey/WCC)

Agnes Abuom, the influential ecumenical leader and peacemaker died May 31 after a short illness. She was 73.

An Anglican layperson born in northwest Kenya in 1949, Abuom's ecumenical roots ran deep with Anglican, Catholic, and Pentecostal family members. Her political engagement also emerged early and unerring, going back to her student days at the University of Nairobi, when her Christian activism led her to exile and, later, imprisonment.

In 1976, Abuom's political involvement forced her to flee Kenya for Sweden. She returned to Kenya in 1989 and was imprisoned for her opposition to President Daniel Arap Moi. She then went on to work for the Anglican Church of Kenya, mostly with national development issues and civic education. In 1997, she launched her own agency, TAABCO Research and Development Consultants, which coordinated social action programs in the Horn of Africa.

Abuom was president of the World Council of Churches from 1999 to 2006. And in 2013, she became the first woman and the first African to serve as moderator of the WCC's central committee. Abuom was also closely associated with the All Africa Conference of Churches, the National Council of Churches of Kenya, and Religions for Peace.

Given such commitments, for Abuom, creative, practical engagement with migrants, abuse survivors, or victims of violence also meant reframing the practice of ecumenism.

"The witness of many in the forefront of struggles demands that we move away from the culture of conferences and statements and begin to get engaged in actions that nurture hope and alternatives," she told the WCC central committee in 2016. "There is room in the gospel for disagreement but there is no room for disengagement."

Abuom's decades of dedicated work have earned her many honors.

In 2017, she was awarded the Lambeth Cross for Ecumenism by the Archbishop of Canterbury "for her exceptional contribution to the Ecumenical Movement, for her work with the World Council of Churches and currently its Moderator."

In 2018, one of Norway's largest private universities, VID Specialized University, awarded her an honorary doctorate, specifically affirming that she "has shown how academic knowledge can be translated into practical action with a clear theological and diaconal approach."

And in 2019, Abuom received the National Council of Churches' President's Award for Excellence in Faithful Leadership, being recognized for her "exceptional, risk-taking leadership."

Abuom's wholehearted commitment to justice was infectious. "When Dr Agnes Abuom is done talking to you," wrote an interviewer in 2021, "you want to do either of two things; punch the air and scream, 'we shall rise!' Or sit in a quiet corner and

ask yourself; ‘what’s my contribution to humanity?’” —World Council of Churches