

## **A Theological Challenge to the Persistence of Racism, Caste-Based Discrimination, and other Exclusionary Practices**

**Statement from the WCC conference on Racism Today and the Rationale for continued ecumenical engagement, Cleveland, Ohio August 26-29, 2010**

*The theological text which follows was developed in response to a four-day meeting of the "Racism Today and the Rationale for Continued Ecumenical Engagement" conference, in Cleveland, Ohio, from August 26-30, 2010. Thirty participants, from fifteen countries, including lay and clergy persons, women and men, academics and activists who were engaged in racial reconciliation and other human rights issues, participated in this conference sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in partnership with the United Church of Christ in the United States of America and Kerk in Actie, the Netherlands. In Cleveland, we worshipped, meditated on some biblical passages, heard reports and presentations on the persistence of racism in several countries; the impact of caste-based discrimination in India; and the experience of discrimination against the Roma people in Europe. We also heard reports on the engagement of churches in anti-racism activities in Europe and the United States.*

*As a result of our hearing the ways in which discrimination in its various expressions continues to plague members of our churches and societies, we are convinced that the churches would be remiss in their mission if they failed to heed the cry of those who suffer under the oppression of racism and other forms of exclusion. Included with this theological justification is a list of suggested strategies for action which may help churches as they engage in the work of ending discrimination in our churches and our societies.*

### **The Persistence of Discrimination**

Despite the claim that in many nations a "post-racial" reality has been achieved, racism and similar instruments of discrimination continue to plague many populations throughout the world. People of African descent, the Dalits in South Asia, the indigenous peoples, the ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities in many places in the world continue to be more marginalized than before on account of the changing economic, political and social conditions that the present world has entailed. This is true even though human rights activism and liberation movements have made gains in highlighting these problems and some legislation has been enacted in an attempt to provide solutions. The legacy of discrimination and exclusionary practices persists, though sometimes in forms less obvious than in the past. The presence of these insidious forms of economic, social, cultural, and political exclusion reflects that the struggle against dehumanizing discriminatory practices continues and that our churches must assume a greater leadership role in challenging them in their old and new forms and guises.

## **Racism is Sin**

Racism, caste-based discrimination, and other exclusionary practices are inherently sinful because, on several levels, they subvert the double commandment: ‘to love God and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 20:37-39)’. These exclusionary practices are expressions of self-deification on the part of those who practice them and, thereby, violate the First Commandment (Exodus 20:3) that states that we can have no other gods before the One True God, who creates, redeems, and sustains all, including us and those we consider as “them”. These forms of discrimination deny the biblical witness of Genesis 1:26-27, which affirms that the human being is created in the image of God. These harmful exclusionary practices belie the reality that the socially constructed divisions we devise to separate ourselves from each other have no place in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Racism, caste-based discrimination, and other forms of discrimination foster hatred and violence – the very antithesis of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), and a negation of our faith in God who gave us life and sent his son to ensure life for all, in all its abundance (John 10:10).

These sinful practices of dehumanizing exclusion are governed by a denial of the blessedness of the rich diversity within the creation itself, where each kind of living thing was named and pronounced “good” (Genesis 1). Diversity within the good creation is a reflection of the value of diversity within the very life of the triune God, who creates, preserves, and loves in freedom and abundance. The biblical witness enjoins us to celebrate the blessedness of diversity as a gift (Romans 12) designed to bless the churches and the communities which they serve. Wherever and whenever we reject these instances of God’s fecundity and abundance, we deny the very nature of the God we claim to profess.

## **The Churches’ Responses**

We note and celebrate the various ways in which some of our churches have been working diligently not only to challenge diverse forms of discrimination, but have also initiated programs designed to promote greater understanding and acceptance across multicultural and religious lines. However, the churches have not done as much as they should in addressing racial and other exclusionary practices *within their own ranks*. This is a state of affairs which cannot continue if the churches are to have any credibility in their claim to be the Body of Christ. Because the very nature of racial and other forms of discrimination entails levels of economic, social, and political marginalization which create profound suffering and life-long hardship, our local and national churches cannot continue to ignore this nightmarish reality in which men, women, and children of God are condemned to live. The entire Body of Christ has a prophetic task to denounce by word *and* deed all forms and expressions of existence which constrain the reality of the abundant life which God offered to us in Jesus Christ. Our failure to do so

constitutes disobedience to the God we endeavor to serve through faithful discipleship.

### **Faithful Discipleship in a Discriminatory World**

Faithful discipleship reflects the loving nature of God and models the way of Jesus Christ in thought, word, and deed toward humankind and all creation. Discipleship, grounded in the principles of justice, reconciliation, and unity, can transform local and national churches. In turn, transformed faith communities can contribute to the elimination of racism and other forms of discrimination in our interpersonal relationships and the social structures which frame our lives.

Some of our churches continue to define themselves as the place where the Word of God is rightly preached and the sacraments are administered properly. However, such a restricted notion of the nature of the church fails to recognize that the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are not ends unto themselves but rather the means of grace by which we are strengthened to live out the demands of Christian discipleship. Through these means of grace we are empowered to exercise our love of neighbor by being attentive to the spiritual, bodily, and communal needs of those near and far. When racism, caste-based discrimination, ethnocentrism, marginalization of indigenous populations, prejudice against the Roma people, and anti-Muslim sentiment are allowed to persist in both obvious and subtle forms, then the local and national churches have abandoned their mission. When Christ's disciples fail to call into question personal prejudices, discriminatory practices, and dehumanizing social structures in their midst, then the churches have extinguished their light; their salt has lost its savor; and the glory of God has been obscured.

The cost of continued denial or ignorance of the reality or prevalence of racism, caste-based discrimination, and other forms of exclusionary practices means death to the most vulnerable in our societies. Such denials condemn millions to extreme poverty and lead to devastating disparities in access to economic and political power, educational opportunities, quality healthcare, decent housing, gainful employment, a pollution-free environment, and other benefits of civil society. Such denials guarantee that too many children and youth will have their potential stolen by premature death either through disease, senseless violence, lengthy incarceration, and a permanent ethos of hopelessness.

### **Advocacy as an Expression of Discipleship**

We concede that it may be easier to talk about "racism" in the abstract, but much harder to acknowledge the actual existence and activities of *racists* within our own communities. However, as faithful disciples we must love not just spiritually but also express that love economically, socially, and politically as well. By our concrete acts of engagement with those

whom society labels as inferior, we come face-to-face with our own propensity to live and even worship in ways that support or sustain sinful discrimination. We must be willing to be “agents of discomfort” within our communities of faith to facilitate the spiritual transformation required to participate in the struggle of liberation from racism, caste-based discrimination, and other devastating forms of exclusion. If we commit ourselves to walk in the Spirit of Christ, we can be led to the level of repentance that facilitates true conversion, and brings liberation to the oppressed as well as the oppressors.

Furthermore, members of dominant communities must be willing to assume responsibility for the privilege they have enjoyed as descendants of those who practised these and other overt forms of exclusion in the past, and which continue in various guises in our time. This includes the honest examination of attitudes and practices for the purpose of assuming responsibility for the spirit of exclusion in one’s own hearts. For those who have been truly converted to an anti-discrimination stance, there must also be a willingness to engage one’s own circle of family, friends, churches, and neighborhoods to oppose racist language, practices, and customs which perpetuate exclusion. However, we cannot stop at the gate of personal examination and personal confrontation. The Body of Christ must also challenge the systemic structures of society which imbed exclusion either implicitly or explicitly, intentionally or inadvertently, and hold those in power accountable. Such advocacy is a prophetic activity of the churches that constitutes concrete support to our sisters and brothers who experience the violence of exclusion in their bodies, minds, and spirit.

### **Accompaniment and Prophetic Witness**

We who have privilege must surrender our attachment to it in order to accompany those who, historically and currently, have been excluded from privilege. The prophetic task of the churches not only calls us to renounce the workings of economic, cultural, social, and political structures buttressed by discrimination, but also to energize the people of God with the proclamation of an alternative vision of life in community. We also acknowledge with thanksgiving that adherents to other faith traditions, and even some secular organizations, have an established record of engagement in the work to end all forms of discrimination; and maintain that our collaboration with their efforts is important. However, the uniqueness of the churches’ task is the witness we have of the in-breaking of the reign of God which Jesus announced and called us to proclaim. The proclamation of the coming of God’s redeemed community denounces personal conduct, communal practices, and systemic structures of exclusion. The proclamation of God’s shalom encourages and energizes those who long for right relationships between others locally, nationally, and internationally, to remain steadfast in the struggle.

If we are to be known by our love for others (John 13:34-35), this love is concretely expressed in our defense of the excluded against that which denies their sacredness as being created in the image of God. For those who submit to the grace that has and continues to defeat the powers that contribute to death and destruction of those who suffer under various forms of exclusion, we are met with the very peace that Christ brings (John 20:21).

The criteria by which Christ will receive us as one of his own are not new to us. What we do to contribute to the flourishing of others will be viewed as having been done to Christ (Matthew 25). The kind of worship which God desires from us is no secret. True worship is that which leads us to seek the well-being, dignity, and fullness of life for those among us whose existence is circumscribed by the kind of discrimination that leads to economic, cultural, social, religious, and political marginalization (Isaiah 58). Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves impels us to make the suffering of our sisters and brothers *our* business. The Lord has already told us what we are required to do: to love justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Let us do it!

### **What We Must Do!**

Below is a list of some strategies for churches, and ecumenical organisations in their actions against racism, caste-based discrimination, and other forms of exclusion. The strategies are arranged in three categories: Outward Strategies (church and society), Inward Strategies (Intra-personal), and Strategies for WCC as a fellowship of churches.

### **Outward Strategies**

1. Expose and deconstruct race theories that negate the values of justice and equity in human relationships.
2. Highlight the United Nations declarations that advocate for the elimination of racism and casteism, and hold the governments accountable for their effective implementation.
3. Engage politically to assert the rights of the excluded people to participate and hold office in political processes.
4. Support social education programmes and advocacy efforts.
5. Engage in education on peace and justice in schools.
6. Make people aware of the laws intended to reduce or eliminate racism, and engage publically to enforce those laws.

7. Link the healing of racism and casteism to the continuum of contrition - repentance - confession – forgiveness – reconciliation.
8. Hold racism and sexism together as well as other instruments and cultures of discrimination.
9. Work through organizations to build a more just and sustainable world by integrating social values into corporate and investor actions. (e.g. [www.iccr.org](http://www.iccr.org))
10. Develop inter-church partnerships to uphold the values of inclusivity.

### **Inward Strategies**

11. Encourage groups who are marginalized on account of their identities, and their churches to hold series of talks among themselves,
  - a) about the pain of having to adjust to racist and caste-centered environments or pressures, and
  - b) how that pain restricts their abilities to move forward in freedom and liberation.
12. Facilitate generational discussions where each generation identifies the pain they feel from their particular experiences, and develops strategies from those experiences to eliminate racism and casteism.
13. Encourage members of the dominant power groups to converse with each other through transformational experiences and journeys to discover how racism and casteism have harmed their capacities to engage Jesus' abundant life and live more fully as image-bearers of God in community with all image-bearers of God.
14. Create safe spaces for people to discuss pain they otherwise avoid and to reveal histories they otherwise would keep buried.

### **Strategies for the WCC**

15. Review and re-imagine the relationship of WCC to its member churches to find ways to increase WCC's coordinating ability to bring in diverse voices committed to the vision of a just and inclusive world.
16. Facilitate debate on what "ecumenism" means today with a view to recognise the challenges as well as prospects for continued engagement.
16. Create within WCC a volunteer association of member churches that:

- a. Commit themselves to become anti-racist and inclusive institutions.
  - b. Share with each other their plans for and progress in transitioning to become anti-racist and inclusive.
-