

Statement on Confronting Racism and Xenophobia, Overcoming Discrimination, Ensuring Belonging

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness (Genesis 1:26)

The World Council of Churches, at its 11th assembly, in Karlsruhe, Germany, abhors the perpetuation of all forms of racism, xenophobia and related discriminations against humanity and the pervasive suffering it causes.

Assembly

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Racism, Discrimination and Xenophobia

The 4th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), in 1968 in Uppsala, Sweden, condemned racism as a blatant denial of the Christian faith and urged a robust response to combat racism. The WCC central committee meeting of 1969 responded by launching the Programme to Combat Racism, which became one of the most effective albeit controversial WCC programmes. It played an important role in dismantling official apartheid in South Africa and contributed to the liberation of Zimbabwe. The programme became the practical expression of the belief of the oneness of humanity enshrined in the fellowship's ethos.

However, despite the end of the apartheid system in southern Africa, and the dismantling during the second half of the 20th century of colonial empires, and almost two centuries after the abolition of slavery, both racism and colonial mindsets remain existential evils that the people of God continue to struggle against.

Indeed, racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination and hatred have become even more salient in recent years, due to the negative use of social media and anti-foreigner populist nationalist movements in several countries. Racism and xenophobia intersect with discrimination based on ethnicity, national origin, religion, economic status, gender, disability and other factors that intensify systems of exclusion, such as statelessness, that deny people their dignity as human beings created in the *Imago Dei*.

Over the centuries, people of African descent, those on the African continent and in the diaspora, have suffered racism, xenophobia and discrimination at the hands of several other groups within the human family. Racist-based enslavement of Africans, especially during the transatlantic slave trade of the 15th-19th centuries, saw whole communities of African peoples destroyed by slave traders. Many African lives were lost due to the inhumane conditions they suffered as they were forcibly uprooted and trafficked across the Atlantic.

Those who survived the journey were exposed to further inhumane treatment as they were made into 'beasts of burden' or chattels, forced to strengthen the economies of colonial systems that did not recognise them as human but as property. Africans who escaped the slave trade were subjected to colonial enslavement. Africans were reduced to a non-human or sub-human species as colonial settlers plundered their resources and lives. Today, Afro-descendants continue to be stigmatized and discriminated against everywhere.

As a result of racist colonialism and slavery mostly by white Europeans, shadeism and colourism within Afro-descendent, Asian, and indigenous communities is prevalent. This attributes superiority to people with fairer and lighter skin complexion over those who have darker skin. In many countries, skin whitening products predominantly targeting Black and Brown women is a multi-billion-dollar business.

Asians and people of Asian descent have always suffered racism and discrimination. The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, through association with the origins of the Coronavirus, and anti-Asian violence, harassment and discrimination have now reached alarming levels.

Likewise, racism experienced by people of Middle Eastern origin was greatly exacerbated as a result of false associations between all Middle Easterners and religious extremism and terrorism, especially following the 9-11 attacks in the United States of America, and which still persist. Among many other manifestations, the continued disregard of the rights of Palestinian people and of the need for a just peace in Israel and Palestine carries with it overtones of racism as well as of religious intolerance and discrimination, undermining respect for the equal human rights of all people in the region.

Among the many tragic dimensions of the war in Ukraine, it has vividly exposed the persistence of racism in Europe. In many cases, people of African, Asian and Middle Eastern descent and Roma people were deliberately targeted for denial of safe evacuation in a shocking demonstration of this reality. The warm welcome that white Ukrainians received across the continent stood in stark contrast to the manner in which Europe has responded to refugees from other regions including non-white Ukrainian refugees.

Many people especially from Africa and the Middle East who sought safety and a better life in the United Kingdom are now being transported to Rwanda under a highly controversial agreement between the two countries.

In one positive example, the German Government demonstrated leadership in accepting refugees from Syria at a time when many states were turning them away and we encourage other states to follow this lead when dealing with vulnerable people fleeing persecution and war and seeking refuge.

Across the globe, we have witnessed in recent years a proliferation of populist nationalist rhetoric and governments, promoting xenophobia, and using hate speech against national, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities. Such methods constitute a well-established strategy

for mobilizing political supporters, delegitimizing and dehumanizing political opponents, and deepening political polarization. Refugees and migrants have frequently been the targets of such political movements, often resulting in grave and deadly violations of human rights.

Meeting in the country where, during the Second World War, the Holocaust of the Jews was conceived and from which it was perpetrated, we acknowledge the legitimate fears of Jewish people around the world of the shortness of the trajectory from anti-Semitic attitudes and hate speech to genocide. Populist nationalist forces have in many places unleashed and encouraged latent antisemitism, with the consequence of increased violent attacks as well as discrimination against Jewish people and communities. The churches have a continuing responsibility to confront the scourge of antisemitism, given the historic role of churches in promoting and disseminating it. Though ancient in its origins, antisemitism remains an ever-present threat, returning in new forms and through new voices in every generation. Here in Karlsruhe, we reaffirm the categorical denunciation by the WCC's founding Assembly in Amsterdam of antisemitism as sin against God and humanity.

Racism has also been perpetrated against and continues to be experienced by Indigenous Peoples in the Americas, Caribbean, the Pacific, Asia and Africa, as well as in Europe. Indigenous People were killed and displaced, with no equitable reparation being made to them for centuries of land theft and dehumanization. Even today, when Indigenous Peoples strive to protect their traditional areas from large scale exploitation they are confronted with racism, threats and violence. Additionally the rape of Indigenous and African women during the colonisation period reflects the weaponization of sexual violence as a means of denying the dignity of subjugated peoples, and continues even today. Those who resisted were beaten, threatened or murdered, resulting ultimately in genocides that have still not been fully documented or recognized.

The particular type of discrimination faced by Dalits, also known as 'untouchables', is based on a combination of descent and traditional occupation. It remains prevalent throughout South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, as well as in traditional societies in a number of other cultures and regions, including West Africa. Dalits and similarly discriminated communities are marginalized and excluded within their own societies, and contact with them is even considered physically or spiritually polluting.

Intersections between race, gender and disability greatly amplify the marginalization experienced by women and people with disabilities who are also of African, Asian, Indigenous or Dalit descent in a world of systemic racism.

Discrimination is the driving force behind statelessness and has been the cause of the exclusion of entire communities from citizenship: it can take the form of racialized nationality, religious nationalism, or gender discrimination in nationality laws, or sometimes a combination of these. Millions of stateless people live in legal limbo as perpetual foreigners, disenfranchised, rendered 'invisible' in their own societies. They live on the margins of society, with no practical access to their human rights and little protection. Stateless people are among the most vulnerable and overlooked groups in the world. They

are exposed to and at risk of arbitrary detention, forced displacement, deportation, exploitation and human trafficking, especially women and children. Statelessness and the deprivation of human rights can be both a cause and a consequence of forced displacement, which is at unprecedented levels globally.

Racism, xenophobia, caste-based discrimination, antisemitism, all faith-based persecution, and all forms of related discrimination are fundamentally contrary to the will of God. The principle of non-discrimination is deeply rooted in our Christian faith. As Christians, we believe that all people are created in the Image of God (Gen. 1:27), everyone is endowed with inherent dignity by virtue of bearing the divine image. God has allowed our bodies to respond to our surrounding environment producing diversities in the human family, which do not entail change in the equality of human dignity. We all remain created in the Image of God. There is no justification in either faith or science for the racism, xenophobia and discrimination that we are witnessing in the world. Divisions and marginalisation on the basis of ethnicity, “race”, caste, national origin and all other forms of discrimination create barriers to the Christian witness to unity.

Our hearts cry out, as we stand in solidarity with those suffering from racism, xenophobia and discrimination, and those who have been marginalized, excluded, exploited or rendered stateless by others, who have been treated as less than human instead of being embraced as siblings and people of equal dignity and worth.

The 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) meeting in Karlsruhe, Germany, therefore:

Affirms categorically that racism is a sin against God and humanity, a Christian theological heresy, and ***recognizes*** that “race” is a social construct that emerged out of colonial ideology that has no basis in faith or science.

Acknowledges that racism and xenophobia still impact many communities and individuals in all regions, and intersect toxically with other forms of discrimination, and therefore ***commends*** the WCC for establishing a new transversal programme on racism, xenophobia and related discriminations.

Encourages this ecumenical body to revisit the complicity of some religious bodies in the painful past of enslavement, colonialism, and its current expressions to journey towards repentance, confession, reparations, reconciliation and healing.

Acknowledges and strongly affirms the positive steps being taken by churches, ecumenical partners and some states to acknowledge historical complicity in systemic racism, to dismantle systemic racism and to improve inclusiveness and equity.

Encourages the WCC to continue to honour the mandate it received from the 10th General Assembly in Busan, South Korea and continue its prophetic witness for the dignity and rights

of stateless people as one of its programmatic priorities, exploring the links between statelessness and various issues such as migration, gender, racism and xenophobia, religious nationalism, and development.

Welcomes the recently approved *Interfaith Affirmations on Belongingness*, and **affirms** that what we can do together with other faith and religious groups to alleviate the suffering of stateless people and to help eliminate statelessness, we should not do separately.

Encourages member churches, ecumenical partners and all people of goodwill to raise awareness on the trauma of racism, xenophobia and related discriminations and to advocate for the equality and dignity of all people.

Challenges our communions to become more aware of how this abomination shows up in our preaching, teaching, Bible reading and study, liturgy, worship and discipleship and **calls** on member churches, ecumenical partners and faith leaders to actively become cognizant of how their attitudes and actions exclude people from the beloved community. (John 17:20-21)

Urges member churches, ecumenical partners, faith leaders and all people of goodwill to confront racism, xenophobia and related forms of discrimination in church, society and around the world, and engage in dialogue with policy makers and leaders in their national and local contexts to dismantle structures of systemic racism, xenophobia, and all forms of discrimination.

Calls on our ecumenical leaders, members and partners and people of good will not to perpetuate the institutionalization of racism by the normalization of stereotypes as they are inserted in literature, language, art, music, film, folklore, and social and public media.

Invites member churches and ecumenical partners to commit to dialogue with their governments to adopt inclusive policies which confer nationality and rights for all without discrimination, and to deconstruct systems of racism, discrimination and xenophobia in governance, education, commerce and religion.

Strongly encourages the ecumenical movement to raise its voices against those who benefit and profit from all forms of racism, discrimination and xenophobia, those who acquiesce to it by their silence or inaction and those who cannot see the need to expose and dismantle this violent impact on fellow human beings.

Exhorts member churches in the ecumenical family to become passionate advocates to help ensure that the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings are not compromised by human or religious institutions.

Now may the World Council of Churches and all Christians be transformed by the renewing of our minds with the truth of the gospel of justice and peace so that we will not repeat the

sins of the past or be guilty of the very thing we denounce and by Christ's love the world moves towards reconciliation and unity.