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Strengthening Christian Perspectives on Human Dignity and Human Rights—An Introduction

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“God has bestowed equal dignity upon each and every person. This is a foundational faith affirmation. [...] There is an intrinsic persuasiveness of the concept of human rights.” From a holistic view of the human person, churches are called upon to affirm the indivisibility and universality of human rights and advocate for the victims of human rights violations as an integral part of striving for justice and peace.

These convictions have been expressed by 47 participants from 22 countries representing different regions and confessional families who gathered in Wuppertal (Germany) and online from 9–12 April 2022. It is part of a message issued at the conference at the end of a two-year study process, initiated in 2020 jointly by WCC (a fellowship of 352 churches globally), UEM (Communion of Churches on three continents) and EKD (one of the hosting churches for the WCC 11th Assembly in 2022).

The conference took part almost 75 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the same year, the World Council of Churches was founded. Since then, the ecumenical movement has actively promoted international human rights law as an instrument for protecting the God-given human dignity of every human being. For many decades, churches and faith-based organizations associated with the WCC have advocated especially for vulnerable people who have been victims of human rights violations.

In the current global context, we observe with great alarm the escalating conflicts, tensions, divisions, and discriminatory nationalisms that once again threaten grave peril to the physical security and human dignity and rights of communities and individuals worldwide.

In this context, the World Council of Churches, together with the Protestant Church in Germany and the United Evangelical Mission, recognized the need to initiate a process of ecumenical study and reflection on the relationship between human dignity and human rights from biblical, theological, and victims' perspectives.

The rich contributions of papers received from theologians, people with different academic backgrounds, experts in ethics and human rights, and human rights defenders—together with the joint message of the participants of the Wuppertal Conference—are made available in this publication in digital as well as in printed formats.

Given renewed conflicts and widening divisions, and with human rights having all too frequently been misused for political purposes or applied unequally, international human rights law—and with it, the foundational principles on which it is based—has itself come under increasing attack. Concurrently, different perspectives on the relationship between Christian ethics and international human rights law have become increasingly evident within the ecumenical movement. At the same time, human security and dignity have become increasingly imperilled by forces that international human rights law is intended to constrain.

We hope that the reflections and common message presented in this publication will contribute to rediscovering and vivifying an ecclesiological understanding and stronger ecumenical consensus on the fundamental ethical and moral principles whereon international human rights law is founded, and that, consequently, the universality and indivisibility of human rights will be reaffirmed, and the necessity of such a system of accountability to protect people from discrimination, abuse, and violations of their human dignity acknowledged.

We, the representatives of the organizing institutions, express our sincere thanks to all who contributed through their written reflections, participation in the conference, and recommendations to this publication. We especially express great thanks to the editing team, Prof Dr Dietrich Werner, Prof Dr Simone Sinn, Lyn van Rooyen and Thomas Sandner, whose committed work made it possible to publish these papers in an extremely short time so that it could be shared at the WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe in August/September 2022.

We hope that in the years to come, impulses from the contributions as well as the recommendations from the common message will lead to further reflections as well as concrete joint action by churches in the ecumenical fellowship to advocate for victims of human rights violations based on a common understanding of human dignity of every person to be preserved and protected by universal human rights.

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