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Strengthening Christian commitment to Human Dignity and Human Rights : conference message

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Strengthening Christian Commitment to Human Dignity and Human Rights—Conference Message

12 April 2022

Let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream
(Amos 5:24)

1) Hearing the cries

On Wednesday 6 April 2022, just two days before the beginning of the conference on Christian Perspectives on Human Dignity and Human Rights, Mbodazwe Elvis Nyathi, a 43-year-old Zimbabwean and father of four children, was burnt alive in Diepsloot township in South Africa by a mob protesting crime and poor policing of immigration laws. Elvis is just one of the many cases of mob killings in the black townships, the vestiges of apartheid South Africa.

The gruesome killing of Elvis was not covered in the international press like the story of the killings of civilians in Bucha, Ukraine, by Russian soldiers some days earlier. One of those victims was shot execution-style while riding a bicycle. Another was shot with his hands tied at his back. Women were raped. These and many recent and not so recent cases all over the world necessitated the churches to seek reaffirmation of a common understanding of and commitment to human dignity and universal human rights.

2) Holding each other accountable

Impelled by revulsion at the appalling violations of God-given human dignity perpetrated during the Second World War, the international ecumenical movement has long been engaged in promoting the development and application of international legal frameworks for accountability for such violations. In particular, the role of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is well known.

In the current global context, not unlike the situation at the time of the Second World War, we observe with great alarm the escalating conflicts, divisions, inequalities, resurgent racism, xenophobic attacks on migrants, violations of the rights of women and other forms of discrimination, threats against human rights defenders, as well as authoritarianism, populist

nationalism, religious and other forms of extremism that once again threaten grave peril for the physical security and human dignity and rights of diverse communities and individuals around the world. This has been aggravated by intentional misinformation and ‘fake news’ in social media and other media. In several countries currently there are unprecedented assaults on human dignity and democratic principles, attacks on the validity of international law, and impunity for grave human rights violations.

Sadly, the universality of human rights is questioned more and more today. Double standards have too often marked the application of international human rights law, with many states instrumentalizing these principles for political purposes, and powerful states resisting human rights accountability for their own actions. Such misuse of principles that should be of universal application has damaged their credibility in the eyes of many, and weakened them for the essential purposes for which they were intended.

These are the reasons why we have gathered for the consultation on “Christian Perspectives on Human Dignity and Human Rights” from 9 to 12 April 2022, which was prepared together by WCC/CCIA, United Evangelical Mission (UEM) and Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) to reflect on different perspectives on the relationship between Christian faith principles, and human dignity and human rights.

3) Listening to what God requires of us

We affirm the enduring relevance of the Bible as a dynamic resource for churches in the ecumenical movement in its ongoing advocacy for the respect for human rights and the upholding of human dignity. It is to be acknowledged, however, that the Bible also contains troubling texts that depict religiously sanctioned activities of exclusion and marginalization, which are otherwise seemingly contradictory to the life-giving spirit of the Bible. We recognize the strong affinity between the active affirmation of human rights and human dignity, and the biblical proclamations of liberty, love, compassion, justice, and peace. We take the ultimate example of Jesus of Nazareth, who preached and embodied God’s inclusive gospel of love for the disenfranchised and disadvantaged (Luke 4:18-19; John 15:13).

The Hebrew Bible records a deep appreciation of humankind’s essential dignity as created in God’s image (Gen 1:27), along with their inherent goodness, beauty, and honour (Ps 8:5), in relation to other beings, as well as to the whole of creation (Ps 139:14). God’s covenant with the people in the context of liberation from slavery in Egypt stipulates a set of ethical norms

that aim at safeguarding freedom and the dignity of every individual and of the community as God's people. The mandate to walk "the way of the Lord" as God's law (Jer 5:5) in justice and righteousness (Gen 18:19; Amos 5:24) is a concrete manifestation of their devotion to God and their fellow beings (Ex 20). Thus, the covenant people are to uphold their neighbour by caring for the vulnerable (Ps 82:3) and providing them the needed justice (Jer 22:3). The many narratives that depict the people's failure to put God's law of justice and righteousness into action also reveal God's wrath and demand for repentance for the transgressions committed (e.g., 1 Kings 21; Isa 1:1-20; Mic 6).

In the New Testament, the invitation to repentance emerges again as an essential step toward restoring oneself to the covenant relationship with God and other beings by putting an end to practices that tend to destroy others' dignity and inherent rights (Luke 3:1-14) and inculcate a God's-reign-oriented lifestyle that promotes just peace, mercy, compassion (Matt 5:1-7), inclusion (e.g., Acts 10:34-35), and equality (e.g., Gal 3:28). In sum, the interconnected norms based on the biblical passages presented here approximate the salient normative aspects of human rights and human dignity—norms that, in Apostle Paul's description, characterize the new life in Christ (Rom 3:21-26; 6:1-23; Gal 5:16-26) and tread the way of peace (cf. Rom 3:9-17; Isa 59:1-8).

4) Discerning together

At the conference, disturbing reports and testimonies from specific situations of human rights violations in different parts of the world were shared. We heard from churches' courageous responses, as well as from the failures of churches to assist victims of human rights violations. In discerning the role of the churches, we engaged in theological reflection on the human person and on the significance of solidarity and structures of accountability.

God has bestowed equal dignity upon each and every person. This is a foundational faith affirmation. Relating to one another as human persons we are called to recognise, acknowledge and affirm the God-given dignity of our fellow human beings. Our Christian faith does not allow us to buy into simplified views of individualism or collectivism, or to deny dignity to any group of people. Speakers from diverse Protestant and Orthodox churches at this conference articulated that personhood, dignity and relationality are key concepts in Christian theology. As we relate with one another, the God-given dignity of the other person becomes an obligation not to take it away, but to

cherish and uphold it.

The conference affirmed that this foundational affirmation resonates with people from around the world. There is an intrinsic persuasiveness of the concept of human rights based on the dignity of each and every human being. It speaks to the hearts and minds of people. Wherever someone's dignity is attacked, others can feel pain, and thus, with empathy and conviction, respond to this attack by forming bonds of solidarity and calling for accountability. Prevention of harm and care for people in need are solid expressions of authentic and faithful protest against injustice and atrocities. Human rights are an important means to hold perpetrators accountable, and to affirm the role of the state as duty-bearer to guarantee human rights.

From a holistic view of the human person, churches affirm the indivisibility of human rights. While in the past often civil and political rights have been played off against economic, social and cultural rights or vice-versa this conference emphasizes that human rights cannot be divided, and new faultlines should be avoided. The conference appreciates the evolution of international human rights protection also through the more specific human rights conventions.

5) Urging the churches to action

We call on churches to:

- ◇ listen to the victims of human rights violations and stand in solidarity with them; and uphold them in prayer and lamentation;
- ◇ rediscover the rich biblical narratives that affirm human dignity, justice and the rule of law, for further theological reflection and discernment for responsible action; articulate how Christian theology, anthropology and ethics nurture the commitment to the indivisibility and universality of human rights;
- ◇ speak the truth and advocate for the victims by bringing the reports and testimonies of victims of human rights violations to the attention of national authorities and international mechanisms so that justice may prevail;
- ◇ engage with the differences in perspective and approach within the ecumenical movement in order to work towards

common conclusions and recommendations for churches to reclaim the language of human rights, and to advocate for human rights and rule of law as an integral part of churches' life and witness;

- ◇ acknowledge that advocating for universal human dignity and rights is part of striving for justice, peace and integrity of creation;
- ◇ strengthen the capacity among church members through training and empowerment to actively engage in human rights advocacy;
- ◇ collaborate ecumenically to strengthen the churches, as well as ecumenical and interreligious partners, who face attacks because they advocate for victims of human rights violations;
- ◇ expose and challenge all forms of discrimination, injustice and abuse of power that undermine human dignity and human rights; especially for people of colour, women, children, migrants and refugees, and ensure their full participation in all processes that affect them;
- ◇ discern criteria in relation to culture and tradition, so that while these values are cherished and nurtured, they shall never foster hatred, injustice or the rejection of the dignity of other human beings;
- ◇ establish accountability structures within churches and ecumenical institutions;
- ◇ acknowledge that human dignity is to be understood not in isolation from the integrity of the entire creation, affirming a foundational relationality of all creatures.

We commend this message to churches and related organisations around the world for their further reflection and action, and amongst other things, help to inform relevant discussions at the forthcoming 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Karlsruhe (Germany), 31 August to 8 September 2022.