



World Council of Churches

A worldwide fellowship of 349 churches seeking unity, a common witness and Christian service

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Adopted

Statement on caste-based discrimination

“Every human being, created in the image of God, is a person for whom Christ has died. Racism, which is the use of a person’s racial origins to determine the person’s value, is an assault on Christ’s values and a rejection of his sacrifice. Wherever it appears, whether in the individual or in the collective, it is sin. It must be openly fought by all those who are on Christ’s side, and by the church as the designated vehicle and instrument of Christ’s purpose in the world.”

(An excerpt from the statement of the Conference on Racism in Notting Hill, UK in 1969)

1. At least 160 million people in India and up to 260 million people globally are considered by their own societies as “untouchable” - as polluted and polluting on account of caste - a peculiar system of social stratification that has its origins in South Asia. The entrenched attitudes of caste identity and discrimination, founded upon a presumption of inequality which directly contradicts the fundamental principle that all people are born equal in dignity and rights, continue to affect a large number of people in many ways. Although “untouchability” and discrimination on the basis of caste were abolished according to the Indian constitution, these practices continue to determine the socio-economic and religious standing of those at the bottom of and outside the caste hierarchy and their consequent disempowerment. According to statistics compiled by India's National Crime Records Bureau, “Every hour two Dalits are assaulted; every day three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, two Dalit homes are torched, and in the year 2000, 25,455 crimes were committed against the Dalits”.
2. The stigma that is attached to Dalits is based on their descent and their traditional occupations - usually the most dirty, dangerous and demeaning occupations in their societies. One of the most extreme examples of caste-based assignment of the worst jobs is “manual scavenging”, the manual collection and removal of human faeces from dry latrines. Although, the Indian National Human Rights Commission has called manual scavenging “one of the worst violations of human rights”, and despite the adoption of legal measures to eradicate manual scavenging, this age old system is still being practiced in many parts of India.
3. Discrimination based on caste persists in several parts of India and elsewhere, regardless of any personal qualities or achievements an individual may have. While untouchability

has been constitutionally abolished and a range of legislative measures, including a complex system of affirmative action known as “reservations”, are in place, Dalits continue to be excluded, marginalized and shunned in all aspects of life and their efforts to claim justice are met with violent reprisals. When Dalits and other caste-affected groups challenge practices of untouchability, they often face violent sanctions and social boycotts. Having been relegated to a segregated position characterized by poverty and misery for centuries, they continue to be the most disadvantaged, particularly of the Indian population. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, disease and malnutrition, and crime and violence exist among the Dalits on a large-scale. The Dalits of India provide the paradigmatic example of social exclusion on the basis of their caste identity.

4. Continuing the practice of caste-based discrimination and untouchability affecting such a large number of people in so many ways must, therefore, be confronted. It is unfortunate that the practice of caste-based discrimination exists in some churches in India. The Dalit Christians in India are also discriminated against by the state, which denies them certain rights and privileges ascribed to other Dalits as part of its affirmative action. It is becoming increasingly evident that the similar features of the South Asian caste system that are a product of inherited social exclusion and discrimination are shared with a number of other geographically and culturally disparate societies.
5. The World Council of Churches (WCC) has long been involved in supporting the efforts of assisting churches and civil society organizations engaged in the struggle of Dalits against discrimination. The WCC accompanied churches in India in various ways to promote the concerns pertaining to the plight of Dalits in that country. The WCC made interventions at the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Commissions in the past. Most recently, the WCC in partnership with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), made an oral intervention at the Durban Review Conference in Geneva on 21 April 2009. It expressed regret that both the World Conference against Racism in 2001 and the Durban Review Conference in 2009 failed to acknowledge the suffering of the more than 200 million Dalits in South Asia who are discriminated against on the basis of work and descent. It further stated that, in spite of the many assurances given by governments in caste affected countries, it was saddened by the daily suffering of so many millions of Dalits today; suffering that includes murder, rape, mutilations, beatings, humiliation, extreme poverty and grinding discrimination and exclusion. Prior to this, in March 2009, the WCC and the LWF had jointly convened a global ecumenical conference in Bangkok in solidarity with the Dalits and their struggle for justice, which called upon the ecumenical community to join the struggle against caste-based discrimination, which is considered the largest systemic violation of human rights in the world today.
6. Commemorating the historic event of the 40th anniversary of the Notting Hill Conference on Racism, a WCC conference on “Racism and related forms of discrimination and exclusion” in Doorn, The Netherlands in June 2009 called for a recommitment to overcoming racism and related forms of discrimination. It acknowledged that millions of people in many parts of the world and at all levels continued to be affected by the practice of racism and discrimination. In particular, it underlined the following forms of exclusion as warranting an urgent Christian response:

“We call upon the World Council of Churches to renew and refocus its priorities so as to initiate a new churches' movement to address racism, casteism and related forms of exclusion in the new context of global economic and environmental crisis, and also resurgent nationalism... We believe dignity and human rights to be at the heart of the Christian gospel and, as concretized by international conventions, the most constructive framework for the church's advocacy work...”

Indeed this reality of discrimination and the exclusion of millions of people in many parts of the world today is a matter of serious challenge to our faith in God, who created us all equal. Therefore, against this background, the central committee of the WCC, in its meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, 26 August - 2 September 2009:

A. **Asserts** its conviction that “caste-based discrimination is a crime” and that “casteism is sin” because it contradicts the Christian teaching that all are created in the image and likeness of God.

B. **Calls** upon WCC member churches and partners to recognize the continued discrimination and exclusion of millions of people on the basis of caste as a serious challenge to the credibility of their witness to their faith in God, and to take necessary steps to expose and transform structures and cultures which perpetuate these gross injustices.

C. **Calls** upon its member churches to recognize the fact that untouchability practised against Dalits in India and South Asian countries as well as other similarly affected communities elsewhere, represents one of the gravest systemic violation of human rights in the world today.

D. **Urges** the UN Human Rights Council to ensure that the draft Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent, developed under the former Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, are adopted in order to provide a firm and appropriate basis for the international community to address caste-based discrimination.

E. **Supports** the ongoing work of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the International Labour Organization and other international organizations to address untouchability and caste-based discrimination around the world.

F. **Calls** upon the governments to ensure that their trade and development policies, and their roles at the UN and its related bodies, the European Union or other appropriate institutions, contribute to international recognition of and cooperation to eradicate caste-based discrimination and to render justice to the Dalits.

G. **Endorses** the Bangkok Call to urge national and international ecumenical bodies to develop further their on-going work on justice for Dalits and to collaborate to establish a global watch on violence against Dalits, creating a communication system between all member churches and beyond.

H. **Expresses** its support for the struggles of Dalit Christians in India in the face of the denial of their constitutional rights on account of their religious affiliation.

I. **Calls** upon churches and the international community to support the campaign for the elimination of “manual scavenging” in India by 2010.

J. **Invites** the participation of all sectors of the ecumenical movement to, as was stated at the World Conference against Racism in 2001, “earnestly strive to break the cycles of global racism and assist the oppressed to achieve self-determination”.

K. **Urges** interfaith conversations to address the ethical and theological challenges posed by the reality of caste-based discrimination.

Prayer

The following prayer is offered as a resource to enable the churches' engagement with the issue articulated above:

God of all peoples

We rejoice that we are made in your image and likeness,

Yet many of your children are stigmatised and persecuted because of human-made categories and divisions.

Embrace all who suffer,

Challenge our stereotypes and prejudice against those who are different from us,

Help us to celebrate our common humanity in all its diversity, acknowledging that you are the source of all life.

RELATED DOCUMENTS

- [Dalits](#)
- [Geneva, Switzerland, 2009, August 26 - September 2, WCC Central Committee](#)
- [Public Issues Committee](#)