



The United Church of Canada General Council

Statement on Human Rights (1980S737)

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The 1979 Annual General Meeting of the DWO (Division of World Outreach) moved that a statement on human rights be prepared for presentation to the 28th General Council. The statement is presented for endorsement by the General Council.

Preamble

One of the tragic facts of global society today is that, since the promulgation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, there seems to be no lessening of violations, indeed perhaps an increase. In every part of the world authoritarian regimes of the right or left, especially those not based on the popular will, are guilty of continuing violations of human rights. The injustices of the international economic order, in which we are all involved, subject large part of the human race to unrelieved oppression, economic, social and political.

The United Church of Canada has a long history of partnership with churches in other lands. In many of these lands our partners are involved in a life and death

struggle for human rights. In addition, through our ecumenical relationships, we are part of an even wider involvement and are called to indicate, on many occasions, the position we take regarding the struggle.

The Division of World Outreach has adopted a consistent posture in regard to human rights. One illustration can be found in the Korea Position Statement of March, 1978. This posture has been shaped over the years by at least two important factors.

1. Mandate

The first is the nature of the mandate which this Division holds within the United Church, most recently affirmed by the 27th General Council in 1977. One part of this mandate is the concern for social justice in its widest sense, expressed by and through our involvement overseas with our partner churches and in our responsibility for the education and conscientization of our constituency in Canada.

In part, the basis and purpose of the Division states it thus, "...God calls the church to show forth his redeeming love...He engages us to struggle for justice against the oppressive forces that subvert the quality of human life. The struggle for justice involves doing away with those social, economic and political structures which exploit people. Justice demands structures which involve maximum participation of people in the exercise of political power at all levels."

We believe that this is related to the Christian view of the nature of humankind. We believe that God has created people in his own image (Genesis 1:27) and that this confers on every human being inherent worth and dignity, making the violations of such worth a sin against the creator.

We believe that God has made the basic form of humanity as community. His choosing to come among us and dwell in community in Jesus Christ, his gift of the kingdom and the promise of our participation in that Messianic Kingdom places the worth of the individual in the wholeness of community. Thus, violations of the rights of humanity in community are also part of the sin against God.

2. The Call to Solidarity

The second determining factor is the position taken by groups of eminent churchmen and theologians of the Third World, and by our overseas partners whose initiative is primary. While within those churches, as in our own, there are different points of view, especially in regard to strategy, we feel that we share the perspective of many of these partners as reflected in their statements in recent years and that they have helped to shape our approach.

In the Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea we read, "A Christian must participate concretely in establishing justice, love and peace in the present reality of history..."

"Furthermore, we must actively participate in improving social systems, in making organizations democratic, reforming systems of law, establishing freedom and justice, stopping the trend to dehumanization. In this effort, although the actual realization may be remote, we must have patience and hope and continue to witness to justice."

The National Council of Churches in the Philippines in 1976 stated, "the reformed society which we envision is one in which citizens are assured the basic guarantees of life, namely, adequate food, decent shelter, health care, education, employment and leisure...It is a society where they participate directly and significantly in making decisions that affect their lives and their future...where citizens enjoy the dignity that befits them as human beings and as children of God."

In 1975 came a statement from the Presbyterian church in Taiwan entitled "Our Appeal" and in this, appear these words: "The world of today is full of the fear which comes from injustice and war. Mankind's greatest suffering is the result of mankind's selfishness. The world's problems of hunger, population and human rights still urgently call for concern and solution..."

"In these times, the church cannot keep silent, sitting by and watching the world sink into ruin. The church, besides participating in the spreading of the gospel to lead men to repent and believe in the Lord, must express concern for the whole nation, society and the whole of mankind. Only in this way will she fail to live up to the mission entrusted by God."

From the church in South Africa in November 1979, came these words: “The Bible records God’s call to the faithful to care for creation and to work for justice. According to the Bible, God intends human beings, in mutual service, to find divine fellowship and community with one another. The church must, therefore, be concerned with justice, peace and goodwill, relief from oppression, and the unity of mankind.

“Individual Christians, as members of society, are also obliged by the gospel to be concerned with these matters and to work for justice, peace and goodwill in every institution in which they may be involved. Rulers, too, are subject to this call.”

Perhaps the Christian Council of Asia summed it up for all, when in 1974, in a statement on Human Rights in Asia, it said, “We affirm God’s solidarity with the people in the course of historical transformation for justice and liberation. We also affirm the solidarity of all peoples, whom God has created and redeemed and is guiding in the march toward his kingdom. We also reaffirm the reality and solidarity of all Christian Koinonia worldwide. We are people for community, not isolation; we are on the side of the poor and oppressed; and we are on the march for the kingdom, rejoicing with our brothers and sisters who courageously act and suffer for the cause of the humanity that God has created and redeemed.”

Christians in Santiago, Chile, meeting in 1978, remind us of the breadth of human rights that we are defending: “All human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible and interdependent. Human beings can only enjoy freedom and justice if conditions are created whereby they enjoy their civil and political rights as well as their economic, social and cultural rights. Disrespect of civil rights and political freedoms is not only a direct violation of the integrity and dignity of human beings, but also constitutes a serious obstacle to a sound development process. In the same way disrespect of economic, social and cultural rights makes the full realization of civil and political rights impossible.”

The statement from South Africa, already quoted, reminds us of some specific freedoms and rights for which we struggle.

“Freedom of association;

Freedom of conscience;

Freedom to participate in the formulation of laws;

Freedom from discrimination on the basis of sex, race, colour or religion;

Freedom of access to the protection of the courts;

Freedom of movement;

Freedom to sell one's labour or services;

Freedom of access to the resources and opportunities required for full participation within the social, economic and political system.”

We are under no illusion as to the complexity of the situations with which we are faced. The tensions between individual rights and the rights of community are not easily resolved. Beyond the clear violations of the present, there is always the necessity to go to the root of problems. The literature from the 1975 WCC Nairobi Assembly states this clearly:

“In working for human rights we are often tempted to deal with symptoms rather than root causes. While we must work for the abolition of specific denials of human rights, such as torture, we must remember that unjust social structures (expressed through, e.g. economic exploitation, political manipulation, military power, class domination and psychological conditioning) create the conditions under which human rights are denied. To work for human rights, therefore, also means to work at the most basic level towards a society without unjust structures.”

While there are no easy solutions, and while there may even be positive things happening which we should recognize, where the human rights struggle goes on, we do not consider ourselves obliged to present all sides in a posture of neutrality. There is always the temptation for us to seek this easy way out, as the church in Taiwan has reminded us:

“When the church finds itself in a difficult position, it often loses its honest conscience, striving to avoid offending other people, afraid of causing trouble. Because of this, it fails to be truly sensitive to the problems of social justice and is only attempting to seek to benefit its own interests.

The most painful thing that can happen to a church is for it to speak falsely against its own conscience. The church, if it lacks sincerity and justice, will become paralysed.”

As we seek to be faithful in our partnership, we remind ourselves that among the stated goals, on the basis of which General Council affirmed our mandate, was the following statement: “It is not possible to bring Christ to people with credibility or proclaim his gospel with authenticity unless a firm decision is taken to devote oneself to the promotion of justice.”

Resolution

So, we engage ourselves in solidarity with our overseas partners and the oppressed peoples of the world in the human rights struggle. In this relationship, we fully accept a position of advocacy as we speak to the people of The United Church of Canada. We take with profound seriousness the analysis of their situation which leads our partners to accept their own involvement in the struggle and to call upon us to stand with them in solidarity.

As a corollary, we assume an obligation to examine Canadian attitudes, policies and practices relating to other countries in any way, and in any area where Canada’s public actions may aggravate the suffering of the poor or contribute to the violations of human rights, to bring such matters to the church’s attention and urge a change of policy.

We call upon our own church to accept this engagement, to support us with every resource possible in our common struggle and to seek together from our government a foreign policy which will undergird the cause of social justice everywhere.

1980 ROP, p. 369-72, 916.

ROP Page Ref. 1972 ROP, p. 42, 263-264.

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