



The Lutheran World Federation/Conference of European Churches



“Justice for National, Ethnic and Religious Minorities”

Central and Eastern Europe Human Rights Training Workshop
Sibiu/Hermannstadt, Romania, 15-20 May 1999

COMMUNIQUE AND REPORT

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language. (Article 27, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights)

We, the 28 participants from 21 churches of different confessions and 12 countries in central and eastern Europe, came together in Sibiu/Hermannstadt in Transylvania, for a training workshop for human rights work at the invitation of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania and the Ecumenical Association of Churches in Romania were our local hosts.

Under the theme “Justice for national, ethnic and religious minorities”, we discussed thoroughly about ways and means to implement human rights in our respective countries, as well as about the role and tasks of our churches. Our reflections were based on the fundamental biblical understanding that “all human beings are created in the image of God” and that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ they are promised a life in dignity and under God’s protection. “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Gen. 1:27) “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Lk 4:18-19)

We express special thanks to the local organisers for inviting us to Sibiu/Hermannstadt. Through visiting this town, as well as the excursions and a reception with representatives of local churches and government authorities, we learned much about the beauty and culture of Transylvania and the warm hospitality of its people. We were also able to become acquainted with the situation of minorities.

Being so close to the war in Yugoslavia and Kosovo, we became especially aware of the urgent need to implement human rights all over Europe. It is clear to us that all parties to this conflict have violated human rights and that there can be no permanent resolution of conflicts by the use of arms. In this understanding we joined the ecumenical movement in praying for the people in this region and for lasting peace.

We also owe thanks to CEC and the LWF who took the initiative to organize this workshop. Our discussions have confirmed the paramount importance of detailed information about human rights standards, as well as a stronger commitment of all our churches on this issue.

At the close of our workshop, we wish to note the following experiences, insights and recommendations, and bring them to the notice of a wider public, in particular to our churches.

I. CONTEXT

During this workshop we have had a rare opportunity to exchange views and experiences across a wide confessional and geographical spectrum, in relation to human rights and their violation in our respective countries. One of the painful experiences which we have all shared is repression under past totalitarian regimes, under which we as individuals, communities and churches were mostly unable to express ourselves freely and without fear. During this period, we would have wished for more help from the international ecumenical community to open a space for speaking frankly about the violation of human rights and on behalf of the victims.

Because of our common experience of former repression, we feel particularly challenged as church representatives to deal more effectively and concretely with human rights issues, and to apply the tools provided to us in the form of the human rights principles, instruments and mechanisms to help promote human dignity and freedom, justice and democracy in our societies.

We consider that some of the most sensitive human rights issues in central and eastern Europe today are as follows:

- a lack of education and awareness in relation to human rights, which means that people are often unaware of their own rights and of the rights of others;
- unresolved issues and a lack of effective dialogue in the relationships between the majority and ethnic, religious and cultural minorities, which lead to manifestations of nationalism, conflict and violations of human rights, such as discrimination and obstacles to the freedom of expression;
- racist behaviour, coming both from the state authorities and from the wider community, against persons regarded as 'outsiders'. In almost all of our countries, Roma/Sinti people are especially victimized by these attitudes and this behaviour;
- violations of human rights in prisons;
- lack of recognition of the special needs of and inadequate social assistance and medical care provided for women, children, elderly people and handicapped people;
- inadequate attention to the social and economic rights of all members of our communities, including the rights to education, health and social security. This situation manifests itself in the endemic poverty throughout our region, and in social phenomena such as street children and the economic and sexual exploitation of children; and
- the increasing violence against and growing marginalization of women in all its forms, including poverty, domestic violence, forced prostitution, trafficking and sexual abuse.

Over the last decade churches, through the international ecumenical movement, have been active in promoting reconciliation between the different Christian confessions. However, the end of the Cold War has also been accompanied by renewed divisions and tensions between majority and minority churches in our countries. These difficulties within our Christian family remain tragically unresolved, and we believe that efforts towards justice and reconciliation between majority and minority churches must have a special priority if we are to fulfill our common role as reconcilers and peace-bringers in our communities at large. Churches have also played an important social role in offering humanitarian assistance to people in need in our societies. As a natural extension of these concerns for unity and reconciliation and for the victims of social injustice and exclusion, and because of their important

moral leadership role in society, churches have to be more actively involved in the field of human rights, following their own doctrine.

II. PROCESS AND CONTENT

In reflecting on the implementation of human rights in central and eastern Europe, the diversity of confessional and national backgrounds from which we come has been a great blessing to us. We have shared views and experiences with each other, and have been strengthened and enriched by the sharing. This exchange has impressed upon us the importance of maintaining and enhancing communication and cooperation between us as individuals and between our respective churches on the many human rights issues which we face.

This meeting has also enabled us to encounter each other as members of widely differing societies within central and eastern Europe and to explore the different political and developmental contexts in which we live, whilst at the same time identifying our common challenges.

We have received detailed information on international human rights instruments and mechanisms which provide important tools to help us respond to the problems facing our societies and churches. Large parts of our programme have been devoted to discussion and work in smaller groups, which have facilitated the development of understanding, fellowship and common commitment amongst us. The results of this group work have been used to continuously revise the agenda for our meeting. We have appreciated the open and flexible space for us to express our disappointments, hurts and feelings of helplessness and frustration, and to move together towards effective and mutually supportive action.

The active facilitation of our workshop by representatives of CEC and LWF, together with representatives of Romanian and international human rights organizations, has illustrated for us the value of church and secular coalitions, at both the national and international levels, for the promotion and protection of human rights.

And throughout, our work each day has begun and ended in worship, prayer, Bible study and song. The richness of this ecumenical worship experience has been a central element of our life together during these few cherished days.

III. FOLLOW-UP

1. The experiences of sharing and learning together, and of praying and worshipping together, have been rich indeed, and have inspired our joint commitment to our future work in the promotion and protection of human dignity. In concrete terms, this includes *our commitment*:

- to arrange for translation of this communique and report into the languages of our countries in order to share it within our churches and with others;
- to stay in close contact in order to mutually support each other in our human rights work;
- to include human rights themes in worship and Bible studies;
- to approach other churches in our respective countries in order to share with them the experiences we gained during this workshop;
- to identify and establish contact with human rights organizations in our respective countries in order to form coalitions promoting the more effective implementation and protection of human rights;

- to raise awareness in our churches, as well as in our societies, of human rights principles and of violations of human rights in our countries, and to develop appropriate strategies to counter such violations together with other partners;
- to keep our ecumenical partners, as well as our international confessional organizations, informed about the human rights situations in our countries;
- to continue to be alert to human rights violations in our societies and to continue to learn about developments and trends in the field of human rights;
- to organize human rights seminars and training possibilities in our own local and national contexts.

2. In response to the human rights situation in our own countries, and to support our own efforts in the field of human rights, *we ask our churches:*

- to regard the promotion of human dignity and freedom as an integral part of Christian witness in society using the international human rights principles;
- to strengthen human rights education in the curricula of their pastors, priests, deacons and social workers;
- to disseminate information on human rights principles and standards to local congregations and grassroots communities;
- to undertake biblical and theological study and reflection on human rights;
- to consider the role of prison and army chaplains in raising awareness in those settings of human rights principles and standards;
- to engage ecumenically in human rights training;
- to include human rights issues in their contacts with governments and regional authorities;
- to nominate and support contact persons within the churches for human rights issues, and to make available financial, personnel and technological resources for a human rights ministry;
- to seek dialogue and cooperation with human rights organizations within our respective country and beyond;
- to speak up courageously against human rights violations, to struggle against any form of injustice and to use all possible means to support victims of human rights violations;
- to monitor and lobby governments in order to promote the implementation of human rights standards;
- to recognize the equal rights of all religious communities in our countries, whether majority or minority;
- to support the international confessional and ecumenical organizations in their human rights work.

3. Throughout the workshop we valued the contribution of the convening organizations, LWF and CEC. *We address ourselves to all international church organizations, ecumenical and confessional, that they may:*

- strengthen the promotion and implementation of human rights as a priority on the ecumenical agenda;
- continue to offer training possibilities;
- continue to monitor and lobby the relevant inter-governmental organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe and the European Union;
- inform their member churches about human rights instruments and mechanisms and to support them in their efforts to promote human rights;
- serve as facilitators for a European human rights network, and make available financial, personnel and technological resources for this purpose;

- offer seminars developing action programmes on particular human rights violations.