



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND - FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL - FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

**Statement by Dr Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation,
on the occasion of the**

50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

10 December 1998

On 10 December this year, we will mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted by resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. This document is the founding instrument of modern international human rights law, and yet its message and language is accessible and relevant to all people. It declares that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”, and as churches we recognize and confess the fundamental truth of this statement. The UDHR also defines human rights in a broad and comprehensive way, encompassing *economic, social and cultural rights* such as the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to education, and the right to participate in the cultural life of the community, as well as *civil and political rights* such as the right to life, freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, and freedom of opinion and expression. By this broad conception of human rights and fundamental freedoms, the UDHR established a human rights framework which addresses the needs of the whole person. As such, the principles contained in the UDHR cannot and should not be seen as political, but rather as ethical and moral.

In the year before the adoption of the UDHR, the first assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Lund, Sweden, called for “international acceptance of a Declaration of Human Rights and of such conventions as are necessary to carry out its intent”. I think that it is very significant that this call was one of the first concerns to be raised by the newly-formed LWF. The founders of the LWF, together with many other churches and church-related organizations around the world, recognized the need for legal instruments and mechanisms which could be used to protect and promote the God-given dignity of each and every person, and their call was based upon this recognition. Today, the call from the churches for legal tools for the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms has been answered handsomely. After the adoption of the UDHR, the principles which it sets out were given binding legal effect in a number of international conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and others. The UDHR has also inspired regional human rights conventions, and many national constitutions and Bills of Rights.

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Of course, many States are still not party to these conventions, and no State can be said to have implemented its obligations under these conventions fully. Nevertheless, there is now an extensive and comprehensive body of international human rights law which can be used to hold governments to account for their actions. However, like any tools, they have no effect unless they are picked up and used. This is a challenge to the churches, to grasp these tools and to use them in a practical human rights ministry.

The LWF has spoken repeatedly on the issue of human rights at its Assemblies and at its annual Council meetings, and it has reflected the priority it places on human rights by the creation of a specialized Office for International Affairs and Human Rights within the General Secretariat. The LWF also understands all of its service activities, whether they be in peace promotion, humanitarian relief, food security, development, education or otherwise, to be activities aimed at promoting human dignity and the enjoyment of human rights. The LWF's commitment to human rights is reflected in the human rights ministries which many member churches have taken up themselves in their respective nations and contexts.

LWF member churches have approached human rights in different ways. Some have spoken out loudly against the violations of human rights. Others have worked quietly in caring for the victims. Others have, it must be said, found it difficult to address human rights in their ministries. However, a human rights ministry is an act of responsibility and duty, founded upon the recognition of the God-given dignity of each person, and the example of Christ. The spirit of compassion, reflecting the compassion of Christ for all humanity, does not allow us to turn our faces away from suffering and injustice, and pretend we did not see. However, this is not a ministry for church leadership alone. Churches are challenged to consider each congregation as, in part, a human rights committee, addressing the suffering and injustice which they see and experience in their local contexts. Wherever people are suffering, being detained, enduring torture, being denied good health, or experiencing discrimination, the church is suffering, being detained, enduring torture, being denied good health, or experiencing discrimination. In such a fundamental and critical ministry as human rights, the churches have a unique capacity to translate local grassroots experiences into advocacy or other appropriate action at the national or international levels.

During this 50th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, two events in particular have given hope of recognition and justice to those who have been the victims of gross violations of human rights: the successful conclusion of the international conference on the establishment of an international criminal court, and the ruling by the House of Lords in the United Kingdom last month that former heads of state do not automatically enjoy immunity from prosecution for human rights violations. These two events indicate a welcome evolution of international law which may help to reduce the phenomenon of impunity and to promote justice for the victims of human rights violations. It is fitting that they should have occurred in this year, which marks the end of a productive 50-year period of standard-setting, and the beginning of a period in which the emphasis must be on implementation and enforcement.

The values contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are not only the values of the industrialized West. They represent aspirations and hopes which are as near as can be imagined to universal. When taken together, they are broadly descriptive of the human dignity which resides in every human person - a God-given dignity - which we, as churches, are called to protect and promote.