



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND - FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL - FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

Office of the General Secretary

Statement by Dr Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation,
on the occasion of the
International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
21 March 2001

Amongst the tenets of faith shared by the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation with all other Christian churches around the world, is the belief that all human beings have been created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and that every person has an inherent God-given dignity. In the Kingdom of God, there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). We are members of the one body. This fundamental article of faith leaves absolutely no room for racism, racial discrimination or xenophobia. Our diversity is a gift from God; not a ground for oppression. This understanding formed the basis of our determined opposition to the politically institutionalized racism of apartheid. That system is gone, but racism regrettably continues to be a feature, and sometimes an increasingly prominent feature, of politics in many different countries. Wherever a human being is rejected and abused on the basis of race, churches have a responsibility to uphold the image of God in that person, to seek justice and to promote reconciliation.

If politics which promotes racism and racial discrimination is abhorrent to our faith, how much more abhorrent is racism when it is encountered within the church? No society, no matter how progressive, can be said to be entirely free of the taint of racism, and churches all too often fully reflect the sins of the society of which they are part. The problem is not outside, but within. In seeking to eliminate racial discrimination, whether as churches or as societies and governments, we ought first examine our own hearts, actions and structures.

Since the long-prayed-for demise of the apartheid system, it has become apparent how deeply entrenched racism and racial discrimination are, and how numerous their manifestations. In the immigration and asylum policies of so many different countries, in the treatment of migrant workers, in the trafficking of persons (especially women and children), in the racist undertones of international economic relations, in the proliferation and dissemination of hate speech through the internet, racially discriminatory attitudes continue to be propagated and must therefore be challenged.

The violence of racism, and the violence it promotes, is a key characteristic of this and related forms of discrimination. In a period of history which has seen the shocking consequences of racial discrimination – in the form of genocide, ethnic cleansing and ethnic conflict – we are challenged to address racism as a root cause of conflict and of the most heinous crimes against humanity.

./..

The 'hidden apartheid' which exist in many different societies – based upon descent, occupation, caste or name – must also be exposed. Racial discrimination and related forms of discrimination have many different expressions, only some of which have been adequately recognized. All such forms of discrimination have, however, the same effects – exclusion, division, injustice, and suffering – and all such discrimination is an affront to the God-given dignity of every human being.

On this International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and at this the beginning of the 21st century, I call upon all member churches of the Lutheran World Federation to deepen their self-examination for the manifestations of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia in our own midst, to speak Christ's message of reconciliation and unity to all those who seek to exclude and divide on the basis of race or descent, and to comfort and protect those who suffer the effects of such discrimination.

In this context, I draw the attention of LWF member churches to the forthcoming World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, which will take place in Durban, South Africa, 31 August to 7 September 2001. It is of great significance that such a global gathering of concern on the critical issues of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance should take place in South Africa, where liberation from racially-inspired oppression has so recently been experienced. The voices of the churches should be heard in such a gathering, and on such critical social issues. I hope and pray that as many LWF member churches as possible will be able to engage in this important process, and to use the occasion to rejoice in the gift of human diversity, to give a Christian witness of inclusion and reconciliation, and to re-commit to the essential struggle against racism and similar forms of discrimination.