



WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
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THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION
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LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND – FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL – FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

Concept paper

Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits *A Call for Solidarity from the Global Church*

*Sponsored by the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation – in partnership
with the Christian Conference of Asia*

**21-24 March 2009
Bangkok, Thailand**

Background

Systems of social organisation that define certain categories of people as 'untouchable' or 'polluting' on the basis of their descent - and religious traditions that legitimize the same - constitute a blatant rejection of the dignity and rights of every individual. Such social structures deny the image of God in every human being.

Today, an estimated 250 million people in South Asia are Dalits, who are traditionally regarded as 'untouchable'. This type of social convention is not unique to South Asia, but can also be found in communities in many other parts of the world. Altogether, discrimination based on these attitudes affects a significant proportion of the world's population.

The churches in India have taken the issue of Dalit liberation as a core priority for their ongoing mission, and have been supported in this by the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). These organisations have long been active in supporting the empowerment of Dalits in church and society, in promoting theological and ethical responses to the Dalit struggle, and in advocating for the elimination of the centuries-old discrimination on the basis of caste. These have also been instrumental in initiating many creative people and community-based programmes.

Meanwhile, many Dalit NGOs and people's movements in India, with the partnership of human rights organizations and several church-related organizations, mobilised themselves for the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa. Although the World Conference failed to explicitly address caste-based discrimination, civil society lobbying on the issue drew unprecedented international attention to the problem.

These networks have continued to work very hard to bring the Dalit issue to the notice of the international community - especially through the UN human rights bodies and other international forums - seeking recognition of caste-based discrimination (and especially untouchability and similar practices) as a major source of human rights violations in the

contemporary world, and trying to ensure that that Dalits are not further marginalised under the present dispensation of economic globalisation.

These and other challenges have always been important programmatic concerns of the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. At the WCC 9th Assembly in Porto Alegre in 2006, there were references to the struggles of the Dalits through mutirao offerings and through the presence of over 50 Dalit church representatives and activists. The Programme Guidelines Committee in setting the agenda for the future programme made this reference to deal with the issue of casteism:

“Throughout this Assembly there has been the urgent call to work together in the ecumenical movement for a dynamic, global understanding of justice. Justice requires transformation of relationships at all levels of life in society and in nature towards life in dignity in just and sustainable communities (transformative justice), responding to those who suffer the consequences of injustice, racism and casteism.” (PGC 02 #21)

The Durban Review Conference (www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/racism/DurbanReview/index.htm) - following up on the outcome of the World Conference Against Racism - will take place in Geneva, Switzerland on 20-24 April 2009, and presents an opportunity to highlight again the situation of Dalits and other similarly excluded communities around the world, whose concerns were not recognized by the original World Conference.

The Conference

In order to gather up experiences and perspectives on the challenge of Dalit liberation and to promote wider international ecumenical solidarity with this struggle, the NCCI, CCA, WCC and the LWF jointly propose a ‘Global Ecumenical Conference on Dalit Liberation: A Call for Solidarity from the Global Church’. The focus will be on articulating a common theological and ethical response to the struggles of Dalits for survival and identity, and on the role of the global church family in relation to these struggles.

Purpose and Objectives

The main objectives of the proposed global conference, therefore, are:

- To reiterate the solidarity of the global ecumenical movement with the national and international Dalit movements and initiatives committed to the cause of justice to the Dalits;
- To link with the Durban Review process, as an occasion for drawing international attention to the situation of Dalits and similarly excluded groups;
- To update the members of the governing bodies of global and major regional Christian organisations about the ongoing efforts for Dalit liberation, and to encourage them and churches around the world to extend their partnership;
- To identify ways in which the Dalit experience of discrimination and exclusion informs ecumenical social thought and action; and
- To promote support for the Indian churches as they confront the evil of caste-based discrimination and untouchability.
- To provide support for efforts to confront untouchability and caste based-discrimination, and to promote Dalit human rights, through the UN human rights mechanisms.

Programme

(As attached)

Participants, venue and dates

There will be approximately 100 participants, consisting of members of the governing bodies of the WCC, CWCs and REOs and representatives of churches from around the world (approximately 60); church leaders, Dalit activists and theologians from Indian churches (approximately 20), persons from other similarly excluded communities from elsewhere in the world (approximately 10); and representatives of specialised ministries (approximately 10).

The Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) have agreed to host this event in Bangkok, Thailand, on 21-24 March 2009.

Outcome

Following the conference, it is being hoped that churches and Christian organizations around the world will take up the Dalit issue in a worldwide ecumenical solidarity movement, similar to the international ecumenical movement against apartheid in South Africa. It is also hoped that the conference, taking place in close proximity to the Durban Review process, will draw international attention to an issue that the international community has so far failed to take up with sufficient seriousness and commitment.

A small group will be formed out of this conference to work on follow-up and to monitor progress.

World Council of Churches

The Lutheran World Federation

Geneva, November 2008