

29 September 2023

Opening Remarks of the conference “Overcoming Racism in the Church”

Antje Heider-Rottwilm, Chair of Church and Peace

I warmly welcome all the people who have come together here in Baarlo for the European Conference of Church and Peace. Last year we were in Crikvenica in Croatia and were finally able to see each other in person and exchange ideas. I still feel it is a precious chance to be able to meet you here in the flesh again this year - how wonderful!

And at this beautiful place in Baarlo in the Netherlands. We were here once before in 2014 on the topic "'Just Policing' and Unarmed Intervention: On Church Dialogue on the concept of the responsibility to protect" with Jonathan Frerichs, Programme Director Peacebuilding and Disarmament of the World Council of Churches.

We are looking forward to enjoying again the hospitality of the house, the surroundings and the region. Our hosts include our individual members from the Netherlands and the member organisations (Doopsgezind WereldWerk - Stichting voor Solidariteit en Vrede as well as Kerk en Vrede) and also the representatives of the local churches who will welcome us this evening and contribute with their experiences to the theme this evening as well as tomorrow.

Thank you very much for being here! Dr Geert van Dartel, President of the National Council of Churches in the Netherlands, who comes from the Roman Catholic Church, and Pastor Hedwig Komproe, board member of SKIN (SAMEN KERK IN NEDERLAND, i.e. Together Church in the Netherlands). We will hear more about that in a moment.

The liaison person from the Church and Peace Board to you and representative of the Dutch members has for many, many years been Kees Nieuwerth, Quaker and Vice-Chair of the Dutch Council of Churches. He was so pleased that we were coming to the Netherlands again, showing how important the relationship with the churches and our members here is to us - and now he had to cancel. He wrote on Wednesday:

Dear Friends in Church and Peace, dear participants in the conference,

It is with pain in my heart that I must let you know that I feel unable to join you in this important C&P conference.

Last week I accidentally fell from a ladder and broke two vertebrae in my spine. It is to heal naturally, but will take time.

I was prescribed painkillers and a brace to support my backbone.

I was hoping that perhaps a week after the fall the healing process would allow me to come to Baarlo, but this morning (Wednesday) I clearly experience a relapse.

So, with pain in my heart, I have to decide not attend due to the pain in my body. I wish all of you a fruitful conference on this important and long-overdue theme for us a churches!

Kees

Last year Ruben Secen, who was instrumental in preparing the conference in Crikvenica, was unable to attend due to a COVID infection, and now Kees is in a similar situation. We think of him wishing him a speedy recovery!

There is still war, war in Ukraine and in many places around the world - with dramatic effects on the countries all around. Conflicts are increasing in many regions of this earth, the climate catastrophe is showing its enormous consequences.

The food crisis is worsening, the arms industry is booming, authoritarian systems and populist movements are becoming more powerful. People are fleeing and Europe is shutting itself off.

One structural feature of the crises, a social, societal and psychological one, is racism; towards continents, peoples and cultures, towards people, men, women, children.

We meet here with the theme: „Then God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness’ (Genesis 1:26) -- Overcoming Racism in the Church.“

The decision to choose this theme was preceded by an intensive process. For this purpose, there was a survey among members during the winter of 2021 on how they personally and/or in their group/community, organisation deal with the issues of racism and colonialism and what experiences they have had. There were 44 responses in total. Some of our member organisations are in the midst of a similarly intensive processes of transformation. In the German speaking region, together with the German Branch of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the German Mennonite Peace Committee and the Quakers in Germany, we held a conference on "Prejudices, Enemy Images and Racism as a Challenge to Peace Work" in November 2022.

The wide range of registrations - far beyond Europe - shows that the topic moves many people: from Albania, the UK, Serbia, Belgium, Croatia, France, Switzerland, Germany, Egypt, Kosovo, Italy, Russia, Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine, India, the USA, Togo and Belgium we are here. How wonderful that we are so many and so different!

In our invitation we formulated as the aim of this conference *[taken from leaflet]*:
Racism, anti-semitism, islamophobia, sexism, discrimination against Roma and Sinti are forms of group-based enmity, which are unfortunately still being reproduced through praxis and doctrines of European (peace) churches and communities today.

We ask: What does this look like in practice? How do communities and churches, and especially those that want to live as peace churches, counter these harmful attitudes? What does an anti-racist spiritual practice of equality look like?

The perspectives of Black, Indigenous & People of Color (BIPOC) will be given a central place in our conference. Our aim is to create safe learning and sharing spaces in which a critical examination of the past and present of peace communities and churches in Europe is possible.

With our speakers we will reflect on the theological and the practical work of churches in response to the call of the 2022 Assembly of the World Council of Churches to confront racism and xenophobia, overcome discrimination and ensure belonging.

We are very grateful that you, our speakers, are helping us with this project. Since this year we are recognised as an "International Ecumenical Organisation in Working Relationship with the WCC" and a few days ago the general secretary of the WCC welcomed us as such in a letter. The WCC's call on racism and xenophobia is an important reference paper for us and so we are very happy about the participation of Dr Masiwa Ragies Gunda, since July 2021 programme director for the work on overcoming racism, xenophobia and related discrimination at the WCC.

Welcome also to Revd. Nicole Ashwood, the programme officer for Just Communities for Women and Men of the WCC. She introduced us to 'Thursdays in Black, the International Campaign against Gender-Based Violence' two years ago under our conference theme "Images of God and NonViolence" and led the worship service for us. This year she will challenge us here together with her colleague Thandi Soko de Jong with an input on "How does the ecumenical movement respond to racism from an intersectional perspective?" and a workshop.

And another supporter of an ecumenical organisation is Most Senior Apostle Adejare Oyewole, member of the Executive Committee of the 'Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe' (CCME) in Brussels. He himself comes from London. CCME works closely with the Conference of European Churches, with which we are linked as an 'organisation in partnership'. Lydia Funck, our General Secretary, attended the Assembly in Tallinn in June and is involved in the 'Pathways to Peace' project. Adejare Oyewole will work with us tomorrow morning on the topic of 'Migrant Churches in a Racist Context in Europe'.

And then there are other people among us, members of Church and Peace, who will help us tomorrow afternoon with their perspective and expertise in workshops to do justice to our task.

My thanks go to Lydia Funck, our general secretary, and Marina Mebs, our finance and administration officer, and Helga Amelung. Furthermore, thanks to the preparatory group with Tshiamo Petersen, Maria Biedrawa, Kees Nieuwerth, Annelies Klinefelter. It is our hope that we have prepared this conference well. Now it is up to all of us to make it fruitful.

Thanks to the team of interpreters, we will be able to communicate with each other: Christina Stobbe, Joey Williams, Clémentine Poupaert, and Eva Erickson.

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Let us pray:

L: Loving God,
We gather from all over the world
from diverse contexts, every
one of us created in your image.

L: We share the hope of meeting each other
in the warm embrace of Christ's love, that
moves us to reconciliation and unity.

L: We share the hope that our faith might
be kept alive and that our commitment
to your promise of a new world might be
renewed.

Silence

L: We share the burden and the pain of this time of the Covid pandemic.
We share the burden and the pain of armed conflicts and their consequences in deaths,
destruction and forced migration.
We share the burden and the pain of the preexisting plagues of injustice, structural poverty,
racism, violence, and a creation that suffers.

L: Merciful God, your divine grace gathers us as a global ecumenical family,
and we meet around the oasis where your hospitality offers us refuge, rest and restoration.

L: We gather, like the thirsty, around the pure
waters of the scriptures, the spring of the living Word.

L: We gather to pray in the unity of the Spirit, to talk and to listen, to share and to build.
We gather to sing your glory and to be blessed by your love.

L: We gather and leave our burdens and sufferings in this safe place you invite us to.

L: For all this we give you our thanks and pray:
Let this gathering stir in us your joy.

Amen

Song: The kingdom of God