

Dear friends,

Thank you very much for the invitation to this conference dedicated to "Overcoming Racism in the Church". On behalf of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands, I greet all participants from different countries, churches, movements and communities in Europe and welcome you to the Netherlands.

I wish you all a pleasant stay at this beautiful place located on an ancient Roman highway. Castle De Berckt has a rich history dating back to the 13th century.

I hope this conference succeeds in answering the call of the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 2022 to strengthen the movement in the churches against inequality and racism. And especially that this conference will provide practical handouts on how churches can work concretely to build communities where every human being can participate, is seen and respected without distinction. After all, it is one thing to declare principles, quite another to put them into practice. The former is fine, but the latter leaves much to be desired.

The theme of your conference is topical for churches in the Netherlands. For some years now, our society, politics and churches, have been paying renewed attention to racism, discrimination and, more specifically, to the consequences of the history of slavery. This is strongly linked to the emancipation of minorities in our country, who bring their history and experience to the fore in public debate, politics and in churches. Historical research into the slavery ~~past~~ history of state and church and social abuses such as ethnic profiling in government services have made it clear that a lot still needs to be done in government, in companies, civil society organizations and churches for the sake of that fundamental equality of all citizens in our country.

The good thing is that in 2022-2023, both the Dutch state through Prime Minister Mark Rutte and King Willem Alexander and also the churches have publicly spoken out, apologized and confessed guilt for their responsibility for the slavery in the past. That is an important step in raising awareness in Dutch society, although much remains to be done in this regard.

But that cannot be the whole story. Our prime minister sensed this very well when he said on 19 December 2022, that offering an apology is not the end, but an important step in a much longer process. This simultaneously raised expectations regarding the follow-up to the apology that should lead to restoration and reparation.

At the Council of Churches in the Netherlands, the subject of slavery history has been on the agenda in fact since 1999. From time to time, it is revisited in celebrations, statements and at meetings. In 2013, the Council issued an important statement on the co-responsibility of theology and church for legitimizing the system of slavery. On 30 June this year, an impressive memorial service was held at De Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam under the auspices of the Council on the eve of Keti Koti, the celebration of the breaking of the chains. I hope these initiatives contribute in our churches to new awareness, a different attitude and renewal of relationships. This is something we must continue to work on concretely.

I therefore look forward with interest to the insights and results of your conference, which I hope to attend in part tomorrow. I wish you a very good conference and thank you very much for your attention.

Geert van Dartel
Chairman Council of Churches in the Netherlands