

Conference Theme: Overcoming Racism in the Church

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Lecture: How is the ecumenical movement responding to racism from an intersectional perspective?

Key verse: Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness' (Genesis 1:26)

Morning session

We bring greetings on behalf of the Staff Leadership Group of the World Council of Churches, comprising Rev Prof Jerry Pillay, South African Indian, Rev Dr Kuzipa Nalwamba and Rev Dr Kenneth Mtata Zimbabwean Blacks. We frame the greetings in this way so that you are able to receive the nuanced implications of this kairos moment in the history of the World Council of Churches, a historically white institution, under the leadership of 'coloured' and black persons from the geopolitical South.

In considering the theme presented to us, we invite you to reflect with us, allowing the following videos to frame the 3 movements of the paper - thematic perspective, theological and programmatic work and group plenary/action.

Video 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VChJh5UvQw>

Video 2: <https://youtu.be/1EJWH52Aa4M?si=75VdisHr2-pz9wYU> (0:00 - 2:47)

Introduction

After listening with you to the song "Brothers and Sisters" by Ziggy Marley and the Melody Makers, I wish to focus on where they sing, "Brothers and sisters we are all". In focusing on this lyric, I wish to begin by taking a theological perspective based on the phrase "*ma se kind*", an Afrikaans language colloquial term popular in places like Cape Town in South Africa. The term *ma se kind* refers to anyone regarded as family (biological or otherwise).¹ Many of you may have heard of the *Ubuntu* philosophy and its interpretation by theologians like the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu or Augustine Musopole. *Ubuntu* prioritizes our shared humanity

¹ Bowers Du Toit, Nadine. 2017. "Ma se kind": Rediscovering Personhood in Addressing Socio-economic Challenges in the Cape Flats," in *Practicing Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on Injustice, Personhood and Human Dignity*. Jaco Dreyer, Yolanda Dreyer, Edward Foley, Malan Nel, eds. Münster: LIT Verlag, 55.

and collective consciousness across public and private life.² A saying that seems to have arisen from *Ubuntu* is “*ma se kind*,” which translates to “my mother’s child.”

This phrase also exists in other languages, such as my native tongue, Chichewa, where we say “*mwana wa amai*” to mean the same thing – “my brother, my sister.” *Ma se kind* is a term that includes anyone you relate to – not just your family; it can be any community member. When you say to someone, “*ma se kind*,” you are sharing in their humanity, and they share in yours. Theologically, we can liken this image to considering each human as a fellow partaker in the *imago Dei*, that is – bearers of God’s image according to Genesis 1:26. It is difficult to share in the humanity of someone else if an individual or society upholds hierarchies that order or separate humans according to who is supposedly more valuable than another based on race, ethnicity, caste, gender, religion, ability and so on. When churches uphold “isms” and phobias, it amounts to a denial of Genesis 1:26 – it is a denial that all are in God’s image and rather reproduces the idea that only some are in God’s image, the rest are not.

Some of the ways the ecumenical movement is responding to racism from an intersectional perspective is through the key themes of *acknowledgment*, *accountability*, *access*, and *agency* as they relate to humans being brothers and sisters and fellow partakers in the *imago Dei*. In this presentation, we wish to focus on these four themes in light of the following:

- (a) that God created the whole world and all that is in it (Genesis 1; Psalm 24),
- (b) that God loves all, not just one or some groups (John 3:16),
- (c) and that God calls us God’s children (1 John 5: 1a).

1. Acknowledgement

Social injustices that cannot be **named**, recognized, and understood are difficult – and often impossible - to address. Furthermore, without confronting injustice by name, that is, without *acknowledging* it by name - it is difficult to imagine a reality beyond that injustice. An acquaintance who had never personally experienced racism once stated that it was pointless to fight racism. According to him, racism is rooted in human nature and will never disappear. But antiracists like Nelson Mandela remind us that “No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, background, or religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than

² See: Steinhardt, New York University. “Ubuntu: Collective Consciousness in Everyday Life Remote Global Learning Course.” Available online: <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/ubuntu-collective-consciousness-everyday-life>

its opposite.”³ Therefore, wherever there is apathy and denial in the ecumenical community, it is impossible to acknowledge the problem and overcome racism. From the other perspective, reconciliation, repair, etc., is a struggle where there is pain and trauma due to racial injustice, for how can one reconcile with the source of one’s pain if that source of pain downplays or outright denies one’s role in it?

Acknowledgement includes recognizing that faith and power have a propensity to define who is and is not a brother and sister. This can be seen in the different phobias and “isms” that plague many Christian communities worldwide. Openly questioning these *isms* and phobias is a vital first step in overcoming injustice. For example, in the case of racism, Boudewijn Sjollemma (WCC) and others took the lead by recognizing that racism is a “specific Christian heresy,” a sin based on exploitative dominance.⁴

Acknowledgement is crucial. It permits naming reasons for the Church’s failure to overcome this sin. It highlights necessary changes. It envisions a future Church free of racism where members are brothers and sisters. We cannot deny that apologies have been tendered. As recently as July 2023, the Dutch Reformed Church apologized for its role in the transatlantic slave trade. But, of what value is acknowledgement of complicity and profiteering if it is not accompanied by genuine acts of repentance. Luke 19:1-10 teaches us that understanding the concept of *imago Dei*, and acknowledging one’s wrong MUST be underscored by restoration of the damage inflicted. Zacchaeus offered a 4-fold restoration of all stolen from those he wronged. He recognized that the amount of profit made on the backs of the marginalized demanded equitable and just restitutions if he were honest about repentance.

2. Accountability

Accountability in relation to racism and the church refers to the responsibility of individuals or society to **account** for their actions and decisions. As we know, academic institutions and other researchers have recently begun to explore the role that Dutch churches played in the history of the transatlantic slave trade and how that role helps shape today’s reality. From an ecumenical perspective, this is a welcome act of accountability because it is an opportunity to examine the actions of churches here and around the world in certain ways in the past and the

³ Mandela, Nelson, 1994. *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. New York: Back Bay Books.

⁴ See Sjollemma, Baldwin (Boudewijn), 2015. *Never Bow to Racism: A Personal Account of the Ecumenical Struggle*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 44.

impact those actions have on the present. Without accountability, the Church may be unable to effectively evaluate past actions or make the necessary changes for a more just future.

Accountability is not the norm. Many churches here and around the world are defined by who they exclude. In the case of racism, let us be challenged and inspired by the words of Surinamese-Dutch theologian Doreen Hazel, who said:

Voorwaarde voor bevrijding is dat mensen in het reine komen met hun verleden, hun geschiedenis. Daarbij denk ik aan 'geschiedenis' in de ruimste zin des woords, dus niet alleen iemands persoonlijke levensgeschiedenis maar ook onze collectieve geschiedenis. Zowel het kwaad dat mensen doen als dat wat hen aangedaan wordt moet verwerkt worden. Het kwaad dat mensen gedaan hebben (en nog doen) moet beleden worden, zowel tegenover God als tegenover de medemens. Schuld belijden tegenover God en je medemens betekent dat je terug kijkt of wat er gebeurd is en dat de wil aanwezig is om aan veranderingen te werken.

[The prerequisite for liberation is that people come to terms with their past and history. I am thinking of 'history' in the broadest sense of the word, so not only someone's personal life history but also our collective history. Both the evil that people do and that which is done to them must be processed. The evil that people have done (and are still doing) must be confessed, both to God and to their fellow human. Confessing your guilt before God and your fellow human means that you look back at what has happened and that you have the will to work for change.]⁵

Within the ecumenical movement, the London Missionary Society in 1977 sought to right the wrongs of their benefit from the transatlantic slave trade by inviting churches affiliated with the colonies to serve as partners in the society. This society was renamed Council for World Mission (1980) which affords each member church equal representation on the board of trustees. This offers a somewhat decolonized model for ministry that invites reflection on equality and partnership within the context of the *imago Dei*. In holding ourselves to accountability therefore in the *imago Dei*, we recognize that because we are made in God's image, not only are we 'brothers and sisters', but God is our daddy. Should we fail to regard our siblings as equal, we are as guilty as Cain of destroying Abel. We are thus accountable to each other for how we treat each other, but more importantly, God holds us accountable for our actions.

The ecumenical movement can no longer be considered on the side of God's justice if we stand against the oppressed and marginalized. As a fellowship of churches, the World Council

⁵ Hazel, Doreen, 1998. *Dochters van Cham: theologie vanuit womanistisch perspectief*. Gorinchem: Narratio.

of Churches accepted the call to accountability, and spoke out prophetically against racism and other discriminations at the height of the civil rights movement, stood up against the apartheid regime in South Africa in the 1980s, and has reinstated the Overcoming Racism programme today.

3. Access

One way to connect the past to the present is to access the fuller story of what Doreen Hazel calls our collective history. From an ecumenical perspective, there are increasing opportunities to meet and interact with Christians from different denominations and societies worldwide. Thus, it is possible to learn more about how racism continues to shape different church communities, but these opportunities are underutilized. I recently heard of an individual who was unwilling to listen to a lecture by a non-Dutch clergyman on the role of the transatlantic slave trade in the Dutch Golden Age.⁶ As an older man, his only access to the history of the period consisted of accounts of a lumber (and perhaps tulip) industry as the cause of the Dutch Golden Age. It was therefore a challenge for him to hear information that he found alarming.

Conversations about the churches' role are not new. There were conversations in favour of and against the transatlantic slave trade. The latter most likely included critique on the culpability and complicity of the church in the establishment of the Dutch East India Company that birthed the Dutch West India Company. Both companies profited from colonialism and the trafficking of humans. A visit to the Ghanaian slave castles reveals that in some instances, the Dutch established churches atop the slave forts.

Did they not hear the wails of their dark-skinned siblings? Did they not smell the putrid odors of rotting flesh and human excrement rising up from the dungeons?

Did their hearts not burn within them as they sang songs of jubilee atop the hundreds of bodies squeezed into those cells?

Or were they stifling conscience and faith by overlooking the acts of rape and genocide played out in their own faith community?

⁶ “Between 1612 and 1872, the Dutch operated from some 10 fortresses along the Gold Coast (now Ghana), from which slaves were shipped across the Atlantic. The trade declined between 1780 and 1815. The Dutch part in the Atlantic slave trade is estimated at 5-7 percent, or some 550,000-600,000 Africans.” African Studies Centre, Leiden. “Dutch involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and abolition.” Available online: <https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/webdossiers/dutch-involvement-transatlantic-slave-trade-and-abolition#:~:text=Between%201612%20and%201872%2C%20the,or%20some%20550%2C000%2D600%2C00%20Africans>

The man's response is not entirely atypical. Many would rather pretend that all this is a figment of imagination and 'fake news'. Yet, these examples make it abundantly clear that individuals and faith-based communities may not (seek to) have access to the information necessary to overcome racism. Access will be improved if the information available outside our church communities is shared, especially where it is unknown.

Access to accurate information is important at both the ecumenical and local levels. Some of you may have heard of the Mobile Exhibition on the Legacy of Slavery (*De mobiele tentoonstelling slavernijverleden*) or have it on display in your church buildings. The exhibition exemplifies how churches are trying to access our collective history concerning the church and slavery. Such ways - among others – help remove barriers to accessing a fuller history of the past and its impact on the present.

4. Agency

However, there is also a case to be made that overcoming racism can only be successful if it is done on the terms of those who have been generationally subjected to it. Agency refers to the ability to act independently and in empowered ways to shape one's life and future. When it comes to ecumenism and issues of injustice, such as the issue of racism in the church, who has the power to overcome racism in the worldwide church? Some believe that those who have historically benefited (economically, culturally, politically, and socially) from systemic racism and continue to perpetrate it should be at the forefront of eradicating it. However, some argue that eradicating racism can only be accomplished on the terms of people who have been subjected to it for centuries.

Some justice advocates have stated that it is often beneficial to have twin efforts, that is, a group of allies processing how past realities inform/have informed their current agency while the impacted group processes how they might heal and overcome as a group. The aim is the same, but there are numerous methods to get there. In the Netherlands, SKIN⁷ (Samen Kerk in Nederland (*Together Church in the Netherlands*), a platform for non-indigenous churches in the Netherlands) or REGENN (**Religion and Gender Network in the Netherlands**) are examples of the unique agency and contribution of issue-focused groups. In the end, each church community is responsible for overcoming racism. The roles, however, may depend on relevant factors. The following are some examples of direct, ecumenical approaches.

⁷ Founded in 1982 as Platform of Non-Indigenous Churches in the Netherlands, and in 1997 as SKIN. See World Council of Churches. "SKIN – Together Church in the Netherlands". Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/organization/skin-together-church-in-the-netherlands>

Ecumenical Approaches

Let us reflect on ecumenical approaches to Overcoming Racism in the Church.

- Video from Assembly ‘All Means All’

<https://www.youtube.com/live/xWRWKZeLx-s?si=rtbQDrrCwYK36N4t&t=1007>

(play to 19:38)

Imagine with me, thousands of assembly participants gathered under the Worship Tent, as we joined in the chant shared in the video clip. Siblings, as the World Council of Churches continues to demonstrate ‘visible unity’ in the body of Christ, we face the challenge of self-inquiry, primarily addressing the question ‘Who’s our Daddy?’ For when we agree that we share one spiritual parent, then ALL ARE Welcome wherever we go.

(<https://www.youtube.com/live/xWRWKZeLx-s?si=s7YDgneGbwh8Q4uR&t=2153> play to 43:50)

The World Council of Churches has a long history of addressing systemic and hidden racism. From as early as its formation in 1948, issues of racial justice were at the fore of conversations. The Programme to Combat Racism was substantively influenced by the work of Dr Eduardo Mondlane -President of the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO) from 1962-1969, who in 1966 brought the idea that was to dominate the assembly and influenced ecumenical social thought and prophetic voice of the WCC. The work of the ecumenical movement and racial advocacy are inextricably linked. For although the racial question was at the forefront of the global conversation amidst xenophobic conflicts locally and internationally, the issue has not been resolved. The American poet and scholar, WEB Du Bois, predicted that ‘The twentieth century is a century that would highlight the race question’. This has proven true, though perhaps not as vitriolic as the early twenty-first century has been. It is no wonder that the twentieth century was also declared the ‘ecumenical century’ by the former General Secretary to the WCC, Reverend Philip Potter, as ecumenical movements – regional and global – found cause to live their common faith in Christ through signs of visible unity was marked by advocacy and activism to end racism regionally, globally and even on the local church contexts, and it is part of the reason we are gathered in this space.

This work of combatting racism was not effected solely by the WCC. For, as early as 1939, individuals such as Dr Benjamin E Mays were actively engaged in establishing one of the first of its kind ecumenical interfaith gatherings on race relations in the USA. Mays is credited with declaring, *“there will be no Negro church in the year 2000 and no white*

Church. There will exist only Christian Churches ... and the names of all denominations with Negro [sic] or coloured [sic] designations will have been changed.”⁸ Such was his zeal for the end to racism, which he understood as a mark of true Christianity. Unfortunately, Dr Mays’ prediction of a de-racialized and unified church by 2000 was not to be. For here we are, in 2023 with a re-established programme, ‘Overcoming Racism, Xenophobia and Related Discrimination’. However, although the goal was not achieved, we have moved closer to transformation.

An unofficial student of Gandhi, whom he met in India at a YMCA assembly, Dr Mays was shaped by the teachings of militant pacifism, which he re-framed as civil resistance through non-violence. These became focal points for black self-determination. Dr Mays was later elected as a member of the Central Committee of the newly established World Council of Churches, and, and elements of his thinking are reflected in the WCC’s work toward social justice, as with Dr Mondlane. An alumnus of Bates College, Dr Mays Was not phased by ‘Yankee superiority’, as he continuously picked up the guantlet thrown his way and encouraged other racialized persons to do likewise.⁹

Dr Mays was a staunch activist and advocate for desegregation in the United states, offering counsel to American presidents in his time, including presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Carter, and represented Truman on a visit to Rome for the state funeral of Pope John 23. A strong believer in the ‘universal church’, that transcended national, racial, class and theological divisions, Dr Mays encouraged and believed in an interracial fellowship that would be ‘a symbol and practice of a Christian church engaged in common work for the common good’.¹⁰ Dr Mays’ commitment to education and mentorship was reflected in his mentoring of the late Rev Martin Luther King Jr.

The records may not reflect his extensive work as an ecumenist at the World Council of Churches, but it is evident that his mentoring of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. would have paved the way for Dr King’s invitation to present the keynote speech for the 1968 Assembly.

- Steven Brown places this in perspective. <https://youtu.be/LAU1XFP-XFs?si=OMnF6W2mx7m04Y1A> (play to 2:43).

⁸ In Savage, Barbara Dianne. “Benjamin Mays, Global Ecumenism, and Local Religious Segregation.” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 785–806. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068450>, p 791.

⁹ Roper, John Herbert (2012). *The magnificent Mays : a biography of Benjamin Elijah Mays*. Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 61.

¹⁰ Benjamin Mays, Global Ecumenism, and Local Religious Segregation Barbara Dianne Savage *American Quarterly* (p. 789), Vol. 59, No. 3, Religion and Politics in the Contemporary United States (Sep., 2007),pp. 785-806 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068450>

The intervention did not go as planned, yet, the impact of his assassination as well as James Baldwin's speech were also instrumental in the establishment of the WCC Programme to Combat Racism, which is considered to be the most significant programme of the WCC for years to follow.¹¹ Bishop Emeritus Martin Lönnebo, Chaplain at the Uppsala Cathedral during the 1968 assembly indicated that:

- <https://youtu.be/-394-ZEkvv4?si=vIOCxFQ-1jCF8wRl> .

In a webinar hosted by the WCC on August 31, 2023, Ms Marilia Schüller noted that the WCC has influenced the work in ending discrimination and xenophobia because the grace of God, our faithfulness to Jesus Christ, and our guidance by the Holy Spirit has taken us this far in the struggle against racism, in our commitment in church and society. Or, in other words, the work of the ecumenical movement to overcome racism, particularly anti-Black racism has been realized by 'backbone not wishbone' (Marcus Mosiah Garvey).¹² What this has meant is that people of all races, classes, and ethnicities have worked assiduously as advocates and activists, risking life and limb, but never their faith, to ensure that the visible unity of the WCC is manifested in the pluralistic representation of peoples created in the *imago Dei*.

Through the programme Overcoming Racism, Related Discriminations and Xenophobia, the WCC has, with the leadership of Dr Masiwa Gunda, been actively engaged:

in advocacy at the UN – on the UN Decade for People of African Descent and the UN Working Group of Experts for People of African Descent;

in regional and local work among churches and ecumenical partners – with Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Reparations and Reconciliatory work as well as Bible studies and resource sharing; and

in our internal work as colleagues at the General Secretariat – where we've initiated training for staff in unconscious bias and inclusivity audits and intersectional work with other programmes.

The pluralistic approach to ending discrimination and stigma is present in other programmes coordinated by the World Council of Churches. These include work to destigmatize HIV and AIDS through the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative and Advocacy,

¹¹ National Museum of African American History and Culture. 2021. "A voice for the unheard." *National Museum of African American History and Culture*. Available at: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/voice-unheard>

¹² See *The Universal Negro Improvement Association & African Communities League*. "Hon. Marcus Mosiah Garvey's Famous Quotes". *The Universal Negro Improvement Association & African Communities League*. <https://unia-aclgovernment.com/hon-marcus-mosiah-garveys-famous-quotes/>

from a faith-based perspective, using bible Studies and liturgy alongside advocacy and medical praxis. Further, the Ecumenical Disability Advocacy Network raises awareness and encourages the agency of persons with disabilities to be self-determining. And, through the Gender Advisory Group, 10 Gender Justice Principles were adopted in February 2022 as the basis for "... equity and equality in participation and the proper relationship of women and men in all aspects of the World Council of Churches' (WCC) life, work and witness."¹³ Drawing on various statements on unity, equality and decolonizing power, the Principles also explain how unequal and unjust power relationships that exist between women and men have impacted the ability of God's people to live life in fullness.¹⁴ These principles though specific to interaction of women and men, are directly connected to prior work of the PCR to dismantle unjust power structures.

Through the Programme to Combat Racism, the WCC was actively engaged in and recognized for its influence in bearing spiritual and political pressure through its member churches and by the tireless work of individuals for the end of apartheid in South Africa. Although the Programme to Combat Racism was disbanded after the dismantling of apartheid, there has been ongoing work to overcome racism in successive years. Two notable activities are the Belhar and Accra Confession.

It is incumbent on us therefore to focus briefly on the key messages:

The Belhar Confession¹⁵

One of the more recent signatories to the Belhar Confession, the Reformed Church in America, on its website introduces the The Belhar Confession saying, *with its roots in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa, as "one of the "standards of unity" of the new Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Belhar's theological confrontation of the sin of racism has made possible reconciliation among Reformed churches in southern Africa and has aided the process of reconciliation within the nation of South Africa."* They further note that *Belhar's relevance is not confined to southern Africa. It addresses three key*

¹³ Gender Justice Principles. "Preamble." Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Gender%20Justice%20Principles%20Web.pdf>, 4.

¹⁴ World Council of Churches. "Gender Justice Principles: Introduction". Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Gender%20Justice%20Principles%20Web.pdf>, P. 5

¹⁵ Reformed Church in America. "Belhar Confession." Available online: <https://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/the-belhar-confession/>

*issues of concern to all churches: unity of the church and unity among all people, reconciliation within church and society, and God's justice.”*¹⁶

The Belhar Confession provides a theological and practical approach to rejecting and sanctioning “*in the name of the gospel or of the will of God forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.*” (BC3) It calls Churches, “*stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*” This is rooted in the premise that “*the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.*”¹⁷

What this means for the church therefore is that in decrying racism as sin, the church must also, in its understanding of the *Imago Dei*, ensure that its treatment of any human being reflects the recognition that we are ALL created equal in the sight of God. This answers the question ‘Who your daddy?’, as our acknowledgement of the imago Dei insists on the concomitant acts of access and accountability to the racialized communities. Moreover, it also demands an equal response with regard to other systemic injustices such as sexism, misogyny and ableism. This corroborates the WCC Executive Committee 2018 Statement on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize, which asserts “*we are encouraged and challenged to affirm the dignity, rights and needs of all women, children and others who are vulnerable – or are made vulnerable – to such violence.*”¹⁸

One can see a very clear connection between the WCC Statement and the Belhar confession. Additionally, the WCC Statement identifies a link between sexual violence and racism - “*sexual and gender-based violence is evident in many different and often hidden contexts, including spousal abuse and ‘child marriage’, and that its risks and impacts are compounded by stigma, racial discrimination, socioeconomic divisions, poverty, abuse,*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Reformed Church in America. “Belhar Confession.” Available online: <https://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/the-belhar-confession/studying-the-belhar-confession/>

¹⁸ World Council of Churches, 2023. “Statement on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, and the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize: Statement by WCC Executive Committee, November 2018. World Council of Churches. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-and-the-2018-nobel-peace-prize>

*armed conflict, and lack of access to quality reproductive healthcare.”*¹⁹ Any ecumenical effort towards overcoming racism in church and society must move beyond spiritualizing racism to the exclusion of other social and economic ills.

The Accra Confession²⁰

In our efforts to mitigate against the adverse effects of racism and other *isms*, one may turn therefore to the Accra Confession. The background to the adoption of the Accra Confession bears witness to the journey to overcome racism. The process began as early as 1981, when the World Communion of Reformed Churches (formerly World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Reformed Ecumenical Council) proposed a study to address issues including ‘the catholicity of the church, confession and the act of confessing, worship, power and wealth, racism and the theological basis of human rights.’²¹ The result, though primarily seen in economic light, indicates that there is a direct, somewhat proportional relationship between economic sovereignty and the sin of racism. One need only watch the news in our current times to note that there is a glaring issue of racialized reporting of, and response to disasters, manifested in approaches to war, dumping of nuclear waste, rape of the earth and treatment of minorities, racial, gendered, and sexual. Confessions 24-27 state this more explicitly:

24. We believe that God is a God of justice. In a world of corruption, exploitation and greed, God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged and the abused (Ps 146:7-9). God calls for just relationships with all creation.

25. Therefore we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all. We reject any teaching which justifies those who support, or fail to resist, such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

26. We believe that God calls us to stand with those who are victims of injustice. We know what the Lord requires of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk in God's way (Mic 6:8). We are called to stand against any form of injustice in the economy and the destruction of the environment, 'so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Am 5:24).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See: World Council of Reformed Churches. “The Accra Convention”. Available online: <http://wcrch.ch/accra/the-accra-confession>

²¹ Rust, A., 2009, “The historical context of the Accra Confession”, HTS Theologiese Studies/ Theological Studies 65(1), Art. #280, 6 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v65i1.280, 1.

27. Therefore we reject any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor. We reject any form of injustice which destroys right relations - gender, race, class, disability, or caste. We reject any theology which affirms that human interests dominate nature.

It is worth noting that like the Belhar Confession, the Accra Confession met with much resistance before it was finally ratified in 2004. For the Church, seemingly bereft of its prophetic voice, was challenged by the use of the term ‘empire’, and the economic implications of rejection and repentance from the sin of colonialism. One is left to wonder, what of *acknowledging* the wrongs inflicted on our racialized siblings, now that ‘perpetrators’ within the church had access to proof that such acts of racism were wrong?

Why is it that nearly 20 years after the adoption of the Accra Confession, there is limited Agency for people in the margins, and an unwillingness to hold each other *accountable* for even the very Confession we agreed to?

Most of all, when will our siblings have Access to the spoils of racism, whether through apartheid, transatlantic slave trade or multinational corporations? Is that not the root of the Lament psalms in our sacred text, the Bible? Will we, women, Black people, racially othered, sexual minorities, people with disabilities ever be able to declare “*You made men ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water; Yet Thou didst bring us out into a place of abundance.*” (Psalm 66:12)? How long oh Lord? How Long?

10 years after its ratification, then World Communion of Reformed Churches president, Rev Prof Jerry Pillay²² proposed very practical solutions for the way forward: He noted;

“We are called to faith in God, faithfulness to the Word of God, and action according to the principles laid out in the Accra Confession.

We recognize that the present social and economic crisis and the state of endless war constitute a crisis of faith and therefore needs a response of faith to witness to the God of Life.

We are called to repentance and confession for the ways in which we each have been complicit in the inequalities and injustices, which we have named in this document.

We commit ourselves to openness to the challenges of the Accra Confession itself as new crises arise and call for new understandings of our own prophetic faithfulness.

²² See: World Council of Reformed Churches. “Accra Confession.” Available online: <http://wcrch/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Accra-GlobalConsultationReport.pdf>

We commit ourselves to liberation and resistance against all forms of domination.

We commit to work together with partners and social movements with whom we walk this journey of justice.

We commit to deep listening to voices on the margins and those we have silenced, as well as to the voice of the Spirit as she speaks to us through other religious communities.

And therefore, we commend to the WCRC body (and to you our siblings gathered in this sacred space) ... these action areas:

- *Critical reading of scripture and creative resources for congregations to witness to the God of Life*
- *The caste system*
- *Climate change*
- *Gender and sexuality*
- *Human trafficking*
- *Immigration and migration*
- *The New International Financial and Economic Architecture*
- *Racism*
- *The theology of enough”*

Conclusion

This vision must include accountability, access, and agency and embrace a sober acknowledgment of past and present relationships shaped by dominance. Long before the Decade for People of African Descent, ecumenical partners, Council for World Mission, Lutheran World Federation, World Communion of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches – four of the world’s major ecumenical bodies – have called for restorative racial justice in economics and policy through the Statements, Confessions, New International Financial Economic Architecture and the Zacchaeus Tax. One premise foundational to this decolonized worldview is reparatory justice.

The call for overcoming racism is not an easy one. However, our proclaimed faith, rooted in the premise of ‘*gye nyame*’ i.e. the supremacy of God (God created the whole world

and all that is in it (Genesis 1; Psalm 24)), demands that we know ‘who your daddy’. For your daddy is my daddy is everybody’s daddy. This Supreme God, Who loves all, not just one or some groups (John 3:16), holds us accountable for how we relate to the other. (Matt 25 inasmuch as you do to the least of these) this God calls each of us His children (1 John 5: 1a).

As God’s children, we must be open to acknowledge our wrongs, create access not only to information about our wrongs, but also create access to those who have been denied justice because of our greed and discriminatory practices. To overcome, we are called to undergo a *metanoia*, a change of heart, attitude and perspective, accentuated by Christ’s love as the whole body of Christ. When that happens, accountability will meet acknowledgment, influencing access and agency of the racialized. The question of ‘Who your daddy will be rendered redundant, for in Christ, ‘we are all brothers and sisters’.

This is the work to which we are called. Moving past denominationalism and other forms of sectarianisms, we press together toward THIS bold mark of God’s higher calling (Phillipians 3:14). Together we can.

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