Human Rights in the Ecumenical Agenda since the WCC's Formation: Historical Perspectives

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Human rights have been on the agenda of the ecumenical movement since the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) was initiated. The question of human rights has appeared consistently on the agenda of every assembly and central committee meeting of the WCC since its first assembly in 1948. The churches that joined the WCC in the process of its formation were instrumental in ensuring the inclusion of provisions for human rights in the Charter of the United Nations. Although the incipient WCC entered the ecumenical scene on the eve of the Second World War, the WCC was not officially founded when the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) was launched soon after the end of the Second World War at the Cambridge Conference in 1946, less than one year after the founding of the United Nations. When the organizational structure of the CCIA was completed by two parent bodies—the WCC-in-process of its formation and the International Missionary Council (IMC)—the impetus was to carry out the tasks through a global ecumenical platform for common actions related to human rights, religious freedom, and peace. Among the nine objectives identified for its work, as mandated by the CCIA's founding conference, was the maintenance of contacts with international agencies, particularly with the United Nations, for the "encouragement of, respect for, and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, special attention being given to the problem of religious liberty."

Dr Otto Frederick Nolde, the first director of the CCIA, participated in the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) from 1946 to 1948, specifically in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), alongside government representatives from UN member states. Nolde was serving as a consultant on religious liberty and freedom of conscience, and he was present at the UN Paris General Assembly when the UDHR was adopted on 10 December 1948. Although Nolde had to be involved in the preparations for the WCC's 1st Assembly, he had attended the session of the UNCHR as an advisor and was actively involved in

safeguarding the rights of religious freedom in the UDHR, which was under preparation. When the Third Session of the UNCHR met at Lake Success in New York in May–June 1948, Nolde presented the responses received from the churches on the UDHR based on those collected and collated through the CCIA's efforts.

With respect to religious freedom, Linde Lindkvist, in his study "Religious Freedom and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,"[1] has described how Frederick Nolde, as a non-governmental consultant at the drafting of the declaration, worked with fellow ecumenist and drafter Charles Malik, the Lebanese ambassador to the UN and to the US, to shape the secular language of the declaration, especially its Article 18. The outcome was a text that distinguished between inward freedom of conscience on the one hand and outward manifestations of religion on the other. It also includes freedom to change one's religion or belief as well as manifesting one's religion "in community with others," together with an emphasis on individual rights. The UDHR Article 18 thus became the cornerstone of religious liberty advocacy by ecumenists, church leaders, and others. The fundamental elements of religious liberty as understood by the WCC were clearly stated in the declaration adopted by the 1st Assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948.

When that assembly was held in Amsterdam, the world had just come out of the traumatic experiences of the Second World War. In such a context, it was natural that human rights would be highlighted as one of the most important issues the global church leaders had to address at the assembly. When the preparation for the assembly was progressing, churches shared a common concern to recognize human rights as a matter of great concern. Through the experiences of the member churches gathered at the 1st Assembly, the WCC was connected to the post-war rise of human rights, but its engagement in human rights was shaped by distinctly Christian faith and concerns.

As the CCIA was established as a commission of the WCC at the 1st Assembly in 1948, it became the main vehicle for equipping, and engaging with, churches and the ecumenical movement to carry out the mission in the area of human rights. The emphasis on the concept of human rights has undergone an evolution in the succeeding decades. The concept of the rights of the individual has been considered a prerequisite for safeguarding the rights of the whole society since the late 1940s. The predominant view at that time

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1. Linde Lindkvist, *Religious Freedom and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

was that collective rights were the accumulation of individual rights. This position was reflected in the Declaration on Religious Liberty, adopted at the inaugural assembly of the WCC. The prevailing political system and social conditions experienced by churches at the time were governed by a number of factors based on a variety of human rights violations around the world. Churches experienced deplorable human rights situations, reported from different contexts, which taught the ecumenical movement that corporate rights, people's rights, and national rights have their legitimate place in a comprehensive understanding of human rights. The strong belief of the WCC and its member churches was that it is not appropriate to arrange rights in hierarchical importance.

In the years following the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the CCIA/WCC was constantly present to advise and to lobby the International Covenants on Human Rights, as well as other human rights instruments introduced and promulgated through the UN. There were several reasons why the WCC, in its early years, was eager to act as a champion of human rights. Ans J. van der Bent, who was the director of the WCC library, summarizes his observation:

> Behind it was the long missionary tradition struggling to secure freedom to propagate the gospel. Thus, the freedom to hold and change one's faith, to express it in worship and practice, to teach and to persuade others, and to decide on the religious education of one's children was of vital ecumenical importance. Religious liberty in fact was the cornerstone of the entire edifice of human rights. The establishment and the protection of other essential rights, it was held, was depending on the full realization of religious liberty. As the United Nations was in the process of adopting international standards for human rights, it was natural for the CCIA to assume special responsibility in the field of religious freedom.[2]

The WCC assembly in Amsterdam articulated the concern on human rights and urged churches to recognize human rights and fundamental freedoms, as was emphasized in the report of Section IV of the assembly:

> At the present time, churches should support every endeavour to secure within an International Bill of Rights adequate safeguards for freedom of religion and conscience, including rights of all men to hold and change their faith, to express it in worship and practice, to

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2. Ans J. van der Bent, *Christian Response in World of Crisis* (Geneva: WCC, 1986), 28.

reach and persuade others, and to decide on the religious education of their children. They should press for freedom of speech and expression, of association and assembly, the rights of the family, of freedom from arbitrary arrest, as well as all those other rights, which the true freedom of man requires.[3]

When this report was received positively by the assembly, a resolution was adopted at a plenary session that specifically referred to the UN human rights initiatives. The member churches of the WCC were urged to press for the adoption of an International Bill of Human Rights, making provisions for their recognition, ensuring the national and international mechanisms for enforcement of all the essential freedoms of man, whether personal, political, or social. The statement also called for the churches to "support a fuller realization of human freedom through social legislation," "protest against the expulsion of minorities," and "oppose enforced segregation on grounds of race and colour." Finally, the assembly appealed for support of "other Conventions on human rights, such as those on Genocide and Freedom of Information and the Press." The assembly also adopted a Declaration on Religious Liberty. This declaration called for attention to religious freedom as an international concern: "An essential element in a good international order is freedom of religion. This is an implication of the Christian faith and of the world-wide nature of Christianity." It also made clear that the WCC grounded religious and other human rights in a conception of personal, natural rights, meant as a bulwark against state encroachment: "The nature and destiny of man by virtue of his creation, redemption and calling, and man's activities in family, state and culture establish limits beyond which the government cannot with impunity go." Consequently, the declaration enumerated four sets of rights:[4]

1. Every person has the right to determine his own faith and creed...

2. Every person has the right to express his religious beliefs in worship, teaching and practice, and to proclaim the implications of his beliefs for relationships in a social or political community...

3. Every person has a right to associate with others and to organize with them for religious purposes...

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3. Amsterdam Assembly 1948, Official Report, 93–94.
4. "Declaration on Religious Liberty, Adopted at the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1948," in *Free and Equal: Human Rights in Ecumenical Perspective*, ed. Frederick Nolde (Geneva: WCC, 1968), 79–81.

4. Every religious organization, formed or maintained by action in accordance with the rights of individual persons, has the right to determine its policies and practices for the accomplishment of its chosen purposes.

In the early years of the CCIA, the principal effort, as far as human rights were concerned, was put into work within the framework of the UN system. The most significant specific activity developed by the CCIA during the 1950s and 1960s was focused on developing responses to the UN's Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices, carried out under UN Special Rapporteur Arcot Krishnaswami.

The CCIA commissioned a study focused on Religious Freedom in the Face of Dominant Forces. The study proposed certain affirmative and remedial measures, including a programme of action that merited wider attention. While discussing the proposals of this study, the CCIA executive committee, in its 1951 meeting, stated: "Every denial of fundamental rights should be made known and resisted." The WCC established a Secretariat on Religious Liberty in 1958 within its Division of Studies and proposed a Statement on the Nature and Basis of Religious Liberty to be adopted at the WCC central committee meeting in 1960. The statement promoted the idea of various consultations among specialists and ecumenical leaders in several parts of the world and published a considerable number of studies. When the Second Vatican Council was meeting, the WCC Secretariat on Religious Liberty pointed out that the main features of a Roman Catholic position should meet the expectations of other Christians too. It also touched on the need for promoting a correct interpretation and implementation of the Declaration on Religious Freedom brought out by Vatican II.

The most significant thrust of the WCC's human rights advocacy established through the CCIA was, from the very beginning, to serve as a conduit between the WCC and the UN. When many countries in the world started experiencing crucial human rights violations due to an influx of refugees and increased levels of racism and xenophobia and militarization, the WCC also started focusing its attention on those specific areas in the late 1960s and 1970s. The experiences of churches in countries and societies governed by a variety of social and political systems impelled the ecumenical movement to respond creatively, taking a stand against the growing and systematic human rights violations. The churches across the world also discerned that human rights ought to be realized not only for Christians but for every individual in society. The WCC's human rights programme

always emphasized that it is not appropriate to arrange rights in a hierarchical level of importance: there should be an obligation and right to serve the poor, the oppressed, and those who languish in prison and to stand by them in their quest for righteousness. John Nurser, the founding director of the ecumenical group Christianity and the Future of Europe, was of the opinion that the representatives of the ecumenical-movement churches who played a role in ensuring a mandatory place for a Human Rights Commission—and by extension its UDHR—in the UN Charter were influenced by a self-conscious tradition of "Christendom."[5]

Although the then CCIA director Fredrick Nolde tried to protect an expansive interpretation of Article 18 in the UDHR, the other two areas of activities developed for the WCC's human rights engagements were attempts at formulating an "international ethos" as well as developing a theological basis for religious freedom. In fact, a new generation of WCC officers made increased efforts to mainstream human rights inside the WCC from the mid-1960s onward. This process was initiated through a 1967 conference held in The Hague, Netherlands, which reconstituted the CCIA by bringing it more closely into the fold of the WCC rather than confining the advocacy to the UN or intergovernmental systems.

The CCIA's agenda-setting power on international affairs, in comparison to earlier assemblies, was sharply reduced at the 4th Assembly in Uppsala in 1968. But the CCIA's new leadership initiated a process of redefining human rights; it expanded its activities beyond the UN and made the WCC as a whole an actor in the realm of human rights. In this connection, Prof. Karsten Lehmann, who works on religions in international relations, says that during that period, the CCIA developed "from diplomats of the churches to proponents of human rights."

A substantial share of the WCC's human rights engagement in the 1960s and early 1970s also has been in relation to socialist Eastern Europe, especially in the context of religious freedom. With the entry of several major Orthodox churches from the socialist countries in Eastern Europe into WCC membership at the 3rd Assembly in New Delhi in 1961, notably the Russian Orthodox Church, the WCC significantly expanded its confessional and geographical representation, but this led to internal tensions or disagreements over how to handle relations with churches that were subject to state control and experiencing human rights violations in communist political settings.

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5. John Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations* (Geneva: WCC, 2006), 11.

While the initial years were focused heavily on religious freedom, the focus in the 1960s and 1970s became extensive, categorically on various other emerging human rights issues, including social, economic, and collective rights. The WCC's advocacy on human rights from the earlier years took the form of a radically different position. In other words, the focus shifted from religious liberty and insistence on a natural law understanding of rights, which stressed universality, to contextual issues and problems related to human rights. In the earlier years, the WCC addressed human rights primarily from a secular perspective and as a basis for protection of rights, but later, especially from the 1970s on, it sought to integrate the concept of human rights more fully into its theological thinking.

The human rights advocacy strategies developed in the initial years of the WCC concentrated on a strategy of lobbying governments, international institutions, and religious leadership. However, the strategic shift in the 1970s offered direct support to groups and individuals engaged in struggles for human rights in developing countries while also extending support to groups and individuals working against authoritarianism and military dictatorships. Following the 4th Assembly, when significant changes were introduced, the human rights focus was also recast. It was well known that the issue of human rights has often been misused politically. Regarding the WCC's policies, there was a general impression that human rights concerns were loaded more in relation to West European and North American ideological influences. But this perception was dispelled by a statement on policies, priorities, goals, and procedures in the field of human rights adopted by the CCIA executive committee in July 1971, which states:

> the CCIA should consistently interpret human rights in the light of the Christian conception of the relation of God and man and the brotherhood of all men as sons of God. This conception will necessarily move beyond the Western liberal interpretation that views individual rights as supreme, to give emphasis to the collective rights of all men to act in the pursuit of dignity free from exploitation by their fellow men, whether this exploitation is political or economic in character.[6]

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6. «A Decade of Human Rights in the Work of the WCC, Report from the CCIA Human Rights Advisory Group.» In: Jose Zalaquett, *The Human Rights Issue and the Human Rights Movement: Characterization, Evaluation, Propositions* (Geneva: Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, World Council of Churches, 1981).

Anti-racism was a major part of the WCC's post-war human rights engagement, although the two remained as largely separate agendas until the 1960s. Anti-racism became a central concern and a turning point in the history of the WCC's concern on human dignity and human rights; thus, anti-racism advocacy became an instrument to ensure a shift from pronouncements to action, especially through the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR). This shift intensified the WCC's firm conviction and made its position categorical and consistent, especially in its denunciation of apartheid from 1948 to 1994.

The WCC did not spring into action on anti-racism even after the 2nd Assembly in Evanston in 1954: it was only in 1960 that it established its Secretariat on Race and Ethnic Relation. However, the fact that this secretariat's work was not mentioned much at the 1968 assembly in Uppsala suggests it was of limited significance. The WCC's deliberations in the following years produced a series of statements reaffirming what had been said at the assembly in Evanston and building on it, but it is only near the end of the 1960s that one finds more specific actions being taken. The continued impulse of the American civil rights movement contributed to develop more concrete actions. In its section on international affairs, the report of the assembly in Uppsala proclaimed that "contemporary racism robs all human rights of their meaning and is an imminent danger to peace. Racism is a blatant denial of the Christian faith."

Nolde's speech on human rights at the WCC's assembly in Uppsala, in the context of the UN International Year of Human Rights, touched on racism, stating that the assembly offered "a signal opportunity for the consideration of specific problems, such as racism, in the context of the broader issues of human rights." Speaking after Nolde, Dr Robert K.A. Gardiner, the executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa, tied the need to overcome racism and the legacies of colonialism to human rights. The specific policy recommendations under the heading of "human rights" that came out of the assembly in Uppsala, however, were still very much focused on developing the UN's international human rights instruments: advocating for ratification and national application of the UN Covenants, pushing forward the Draft International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Religious Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief, and promoting the appointment of a high-level UN official tasked with coordinating action in the field of human rights.

Although the term "human rights" was not the focus of the deliberations of the PCR, and although it had made relatively little use of the language of human rights, the PCR's emphasis and activities undoubtedly fell within the ambit of human rights. Since the Western liberal conceptualization of human rights largely viewed human rights only in liberal individualist terms, human rights language was not stressed as a focus of the PCR. Racism, then and now, being one of the most pertinent issues related to human dignity and human rights, has been a real problem of human rights. But the approach of PCR was to move beyond the concept of rights of individuals to encompass the liberation of peoples. The struggle against racism in the 1960s and 1970s wasn't seen as people's struggle against the violation of human rights. The high visibility of the PCR during that time therefore considered or marked an ideological shift for the WCC, where the battle for social justice became more important than engagement for human rights in its limited liberal understanding.

The WCC's engagement with the UN and human rights discussions through its commission, the CCIA, helped to initiate the crafting of an anti-racism policy with human rights language over the years. However, there was a general perception that there existed only a weak connection between the WCC's human rights agenda from 1948 to 1968 and its establishment of the Programme to Combat Racism in 1969. But the CCIA remained committed to its liberal human rights idiom, focused on non-discrimination and civil and political rights, whereas anti-racism, especially in a case like the struggle against apartheid, was growing into something more radical. The discussions on racism leading up to the PCR's creation were dominated by concern for structural, especially economic, factors. It was in the 1970s that the WCC was more firmly able to redefine its human rights advocacy to be attuned with support for people's struggles for social justice and liberation from social discrimination, paving the way for the PCR's work to be fully understood as a struggle for human rights. The affirmation that human dignity as the key criterion for human rights should be the basis for "standards of minimum treatment" was more evinced in the anti-racism programme. The PCR's stress on supporting liberation movements gave new impetus for the WCC to apply similar approaches in the case of other people's movements working in contexts such as the rise of military dictatorships in Latin America.

Controversy over the WCC's position on human rights became most serious when the Orthodox layman Lev Regelson and a priest, Yakunin, sent a letter to the WCC's general secretary, Philip Potter, in 1975, on the

eve of the assembly in Nairobi. While Potter did not allow the letter to be discussed as part of the assembly's formal proceedings, long excerpts from it were published in the assembly newspaper on 25 November 1975. Russian Orthodox members called the WCC to make religious liberty "the central theme of Christian ecumenism," which ultimately led to discussion on the Helsinki Final Act. The multifaceted act addressed a range of prominent global issues and in so doing had a far-reaching effect on Cold War politics and US–Soviet Union relations. The assembly in Nairobi was "unable to reach a clear position or critical reflection on its own attitude towards the question of religious freedom in the socialist states." However, at the assembly in Nairobi, the WCC adopted a position on human rights that constituted a major turn away from its established stance, which triggered what would subsequently be referred to as a "human rights explosion" in the work of the WCC.

At the assembly in Uppsala in 1968, during the United Nations' International Year for Human Rights, the WCC continued to prioritize religious liberty as the key item on the churches' agenda, since the impact of this issue was seen to affect the churches most directly. The assembly in Nairobi subsumed the whole explosive issue of human rights under a section entitled Structures of Injustice and Struggles for Liberation.

The need for churches to embrace human rights as part of a wider vision was emphasized by the CCIA from time to time. Ahead of the WCC central committee's 1971 meeting in Addis Ababa, the CCIA submitted a Memorandum on Human Rights and a statement on Unity and Human Rights in Africa Today. The memorandum focused attention on the need to implement human rights standards as established at the UN and by regional bodies in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. The statement on Unity and Human Rights in Africa Today warned of the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the form of foreign interference, which "makes the solution of the existing problems of tribalism and internal dissidence more difficult." The statement called also for the support of the WCC's member churches aimed at assisting African nations in attaining and preserving "their full self-determination, independence, and unity," including pressuring governments and corporations to cease selling arms to white-minority regimes, "giving support and encouragement to foreign mercenaries," and executing projects that "entrench racist and colonial majority regimes in Africa."

The WCC underscored a number of social, economic, and collective rights—such as the right to work, food, health care, education, and self-determination—in addition to civil and political rights. Religious freedom featured as only one issue among others: it occupied last place in a list of six general headings. Moreover, the assembly in Nairobi emphasized the need to look at the conditions under which human rights were violated, thus embedding concern for human rights in a far more wide-ranging agenda for progressive change. With over 50 percent of the WCC's member churches coming from outside the West, whereas the ecumenical movement had originally emanated from Western Europe and North America, the new stance represented a challenge to established liberal views on human rights as represented by Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, and the International League for the Rights of Man. Finally, the assembly in Nairobi shifted the locus of the WCC's engagement to its member churches. Although the CCIA would continue representing the WCC at the United Nations, the churches belonging to WCC membership were called upon to undertake action at the local, national, and international level. The assembly in Nairobi's new agenda for human rights was hailed by its proponents as a newly "integral" or "inclusive" ecumenical consensus, but it was, and has continued to be, a source of great controversy.

Ecumenical human rights engagements in Latin America, facilitated and coordinated by the WCC in the 1970s, concentrated mainly on opposition to the rise of military dictatorships in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile, among other countries. Solidarity supports spurred a worldwide response during those years, generating a transnational human rights network in which the WCC was a key actor. WCC's long-standing commitment and experiences in human rights advocacy helped to enable effective international campaigns against the repressions and human rights violations that were intensifying across Latin America.

The first country that drew the WCC's attention in Latin America was Brazil, which had been under military dictatorship since a coup in 1964, but where repression intensified significantly from December 1968. The WCC had maintained close relations with Brazilian member churches since the 1950s. As information about the ongoing repression within the country under the authoritarian dictatorship began to leak out, WCC started condemning the deteriorating situation. The CCIA's documents of the early 1970s show how it self-consciously chose the frame of human rights as the appropriate one to combat repression, while maintaining a structural analysis of its causes

in the Latin American context.

The WCC executive committee in 1970 "noted that there was growing concern about the increasing number of reports alleging severe curtailment of human rights and legal guarantees in Brazil." It moved for "the proper bodies of the World Council" to support "those who, in conscience, may be struggling for the realization of human rights for all without discrimination." Rev. Dwain C. Epps, who was CCIA's secretary in the 1970s, wrote an overview of the situation in Latin America in which he reported that "where no provision has been taken to ensure that a nation participates justly in the profits derived from the exploitation of its natural resources and manpower by foreign investors, not only is little done to narrow the gap between rich and poor, oligarchies find themselves obliged to resort to frequently brutal political repression in order to maintain their privileged position." His analysis further elaborated that "the clearest response the CCIA can make to the situation described above is to be found within the frame of reference of the protection of human rights." When the human rights situation was deteriorating in Uruguay, the WCC became directly involved. A series of meetings organized with Latin American church leaders in 1972 analyzed and highlighted the extent of the government's repressive measures.

The WCC's embryonic work on Brazil and Uruguay, especially through initiating "a pilot project on human rights law and defence of political prisoners in Argentina," led the WCC's staff to begin to dream of broader possibilities of involving the churches more deeply in the field of human rights to envision collective actions against human rights violations. In 1972, the WCC's Latin America Working Party recommended at a meeting that the WCC give priority to "the formation of a Working Group on Human Rights composed of leaders of the member Churches who have shown their concern about the human rights violations." Facilitated by the CCIA, together with two other WCC programme areas—the Commission on Inter-Church Aid Refugee and World Service (CICARWS) and the Commission of the Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD)—this working group was aimed at starting a process to educate the Latin American churches about the attacks on human dignity in Latin America. The Working Party's proposal resulted in a Consultation on Human Rights and the Churches in Latin America.

Human rights in relation to Latin America was another major issue discussed at the assembly in Nairobi. A report produced at the assembly on Latin America reflected concerns of the developing world and reiterated

the importance of the relationship between structural root causes, such as underdevelopment and inequality on the one hand and symptoms—violations of human rights—on the other. The immediate concern of the report addressed civil and political rights, since the military regimes that had come to power in Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and elsewhere in the preceding years stood in the way of social justice. The major concerns addressed included the illegitimate way in which governments had come to power in these countries, repression, torture, and disappearances. Financial and other support for organizations opposing these regimes marked an important step in the WCC's human rights engagement, especially from the 1973 military coup in Chile onward, as the WCC instituted a separate Human Rights Resources Office for Latin America (HRROLA), which helped spur the assembly in Nairobi to its ambitious vision for human rights.

HRROLA has always worked in close collaboration with the CCIA. The methodologies evolved in the CCIA for human rights activities have been tested and found effective in Latin American human rights advocacy work. From the experiences of the work related to HRROLA, it was found that the way in which monitoring, advocacy, study, and awareness-building intertwine in efforts to enable churches in Latin America to defend human rights has become both a challenge and a model for ecumenical involvement in working toward upholding human dignity and human rights.[7]

The ecumenical response to systematic and brutal human rights violations in Latin America was the crucible in which the WCC's conception of human rights was expanded and reworked into a thrust on liberation theology. While many liberation theologians were initially indifferent or suspicious of the concept of human rights, ecumenical meetings helped to convince them of not only its pragmatic utility but its value as a moral principle. At the same time, they remained aware of some of its limitations and conceived of it as part of a Christian social ethic rather than its starting point. As the CCIA's executive secretary, Erich Weingärtner, looking back in 1983, observed regarding Chile, the WCC had exercised "considerable restraint" in speaking out publicly.[8] This is due to the fact that it was felt much more important to support the life and witness of the churches of Chile, which ultimately

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7. van der Bent, *Christian Response*, 33.

8. Bastiaan Bouwman, Universal Rights in a Divided World: The Human Rights Engagement of the World Council of Churches from the 1940s to the 1970s. Thesis submitted to the Department of International History of the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London, September 2018

has been proven to be far more effective for the promotion of human rights than making a political point by means of a statement. It was true to assume from experiences that the WCC and its interlocutors were uncertain as to whether social, economic, and collective concerns could effectively be framed as rights. However, WCC leaders were convinced that in a moral key, WCC could play an important role to generate moral outrage and pressure for structural changes.

In this regard, Bastiaan Bouwman, a research scholar at the Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, observed that the relationship between human rights as articulated at the assemblies in Uppsala and Nairobi on the one hand, and other ecumenical causes on the other, was an important one that needed to be further researched. He observes:

> Racism, self-determination, refugees, development, the position of women, and other issues were clearly connected to the WCC's discourse on human rights, but the nature of these linkages and intersections varied over time. As an institution that engendered debate and action in relation to these issues, the WCC impacted upon the imaginaries of many millions of Christians worldwide. By vastly expanding its conception of human rights at Nairobi, the WCC went far beyond what secular partner organizations like Amnesty International were willing to say and do. Whereas Amnesty tended to decontextualize human rights violations in order to depoliticize them, and at the time only worked on issues of civil and political rights, the WCC pulled in the opposite direction, embracing human rights as part of a much wider, religiously inspired vision of liberation.[9]

While the human rights situation in many parts of the world became complex, the question of how to prioritize the emphasis and focus of the WCC's human rights work in terms of addressing such a situation was often pondered within the WCC from the 1970s onward. WCC central committee meetings held in 1972 and 1973 decided to "urge member churches individually and collectively to strengthen their actions for the implementation of human rights." This was happening amidst mounting

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9. Bastiaan Bouwman, "Nairobi, 1975: The World Council of Churches and Human Rights" in Online Atlas on the History of Humanitarianism and Human Rights https://hhr-atlas.ieg-mainz.de/articles/bouwman-nairobi.

controversy regarding the content of human rights. It was in this context that an international consultation on Human Rights and Christian Responsibility was organized by the CCIA/WCC in 1974 at St Pölten, Austria.

The St Pölten consultation, with participants hailing from seven regions, represented a major step in the process whereby the WCC sought to articulate its position and policy on human rights. It identified six basic rights: "the essential human right to life, the right to enjoy and maintain cultural identity, the right to participate in decision-making within the community, the right to dissent, the right to personal dignity, which includes protection from torture, and the right to religious liberty." This list was taken with minor modifications from the consultation's report and was presented to the assembly in Nairobi. The St Pölten consultation stated: "Individual rights and collective rights are not in flat opposition. They are related. It should be the aim of the community to secure the welfare of all its members, the aim of the individual to serve the general good. In both instances rights involve responsibilities." In this context, WCC stated that it was important to challenge any society that, for the sake of what it calls national security, violated human rights and freedom of individuals as well as those who were standing against authoritarianism and dictatorship. The WCC central committee meeting held in Geneva in August 1973 received the report of the St Pölten consultation and stated: "it is a demand of the Gospel that Christians become directly involved in processes of change of all social structures in which human rights are not fully implemented."[10]

While contributing to the shift toward embracing a conception of human rights that varied sharply from that of the previous decades, different interpretations were offered by the St Pölten consultation as to how to understand this recasting of human rights: it was capacious, liberationist, communitarian, and overtly political, as opposed to being focused on religious freedom, secular, individualist, and depoliticized. A process of mainstreaming the concept of human rights within the WCC was introduced, especially by getting different departments and commissions of the WCC to reframe their work in terms of human rights.

The position of the WCC, based on its convictions, that emerged from various studies and discussions by the time of the 5th Assembly, was that a church seeking the realization only of its own rights is neither credible nor

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10. CCIA, The Churches in International Affairs: Reports 1974–1978 (Geneva: WCC, 1979), 14.

true to the gospel mandate. The right to religious freedom was therefore integrated into a comprehensive catalogue as one of the basic human rights but no longer given any exclusive predominance. The shift that took place at that time was in the direction of enriching and enlarging existing narrow definitions and putting human rights into the context of concrete historical situations, as well as an increasing emphasis on the essential role of member churches in the implementation of human rights in this larger perspective.

The St Pölten consultation and the assembly in Nairobi became significant milestones for providing a biblical basis for human rights, which subsequent theological consultations and debates elaborated on. The effects of this differed depending on its reception by the WCC's member churches and related organizations.

The Interconfessional Study Project on the Theological Basis of Human Rights, coordinated by the CCIA from 1978 to 1980, brought together in a common platform various interconfessional bodies such as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, the Preparatory Committee of the Pan Orthodox Council, the Baptist World Alliance, and the Anglican Consultative Council. Theologians who represented these organizations attended a month-long meeting held in Geneva in 1980 and affirmed

> that a common Christian understanding exists in the basic doctrine that all theological statements on human rights derive from the Christian anthropology of the human person created in the image of God. Thus, all people irrespective of their skills and achievements have the same inviolable and inalienable dignity and a common hope: the human destiny of being made in the image of God is to be perfected by becoming like unto God.[11]

There was a general perception during those days that though the WCC stressed collective rights, this should be understood as a negation of a narrow liberal conception of human rights rather than of individual civil and political rights as such. It was also understood by many that the outcome of consultation at St Pölten and the assembly in Nairobi was a compromise between collectivist third-world representatives and individualist first-world representatives. In fact, the WCC was not content to merely point the finger

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11. "An Interconfessional Study Project on the Theological Basis of Human Rights," in *Human Rights: A Challenge to Theology*, Marc Reuver, ed. (Rome: CCIA & IDOC International, 1983), 20–27, at 25.

at the global North: it encouraged churches in the South to adopt a critical stance toward their own societies and states. For example, WCC general secretary Philip Potter's speech at the assembly of the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), held in Lusaka in 1974, outlined the main thrust of the WCC's position. Potter stated that although Africans had suffered untold hardships by the foreigners, he challenged Africans to see the other side of the coin—their own contribution to injustice and oppression—and emphatically declared the need to also take an introspective look at themselves.

In the years following the assembly in Nairobi, the CCIA put out major statements that reflected the continuing capaciousness of its human rights agenda: torture (1977), extrajudicial executions (1982), refugees and migrant workers (1983), the death penalty (1990), Indigenous people and land rights (1991), and violence against women (1992). At the same time, its programmatic emphasis on root causes and its concomitant stress on collective rights remained. In 1993, a CCIA review reaffirmed the 6th Assembly of the WCC's 1983 statement that "human rights cannot be dealt with in isolation from the larger issues of peace, justice, militarism, disarmament and development." In line with this, the CCIA observed that "most WCC programmes are designed to promote and bring about structural changes in favour of the poor and the oppressed."

The WCC's member churches were thus "encouraged to promote efforts that are geared to enlarge socio-economic, political and cultural rights of the people." The review mentioned "specific human rights issues" such as "torture, death penalty, extra-judicial killings, etc." At St Pölten and Nairobi, the WCC embraced a conception of human rights that differed sharply from that of the previous decades: it was extensive, liberationist, communitarian, and overtly political, as opposed to focused on religious freedom, secular, individualist, and depoliticized. Different interpretations have been offered as to how to understand this changing and reorganizing concept of human rights. Karsten Lehmann has opined that these years saw a process of mainstreaming the concept of human rights within the WCC, whereby human rights were adopted as a common denominator of WCC activities.[12] Different programme units or areas of the WCC reframed their ongoing activities in terms of human rights.[13]

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12. Karsten Lehmann, *Religious NGOs in International Relations: The Construction of 'the Religious' and 'the Secular'* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 112–14.
13. CCIA, *Churches in International Affairs*, 46.

The increased role of the ecumenical community in concrete expressions of international solidarity in the struggle for human rights and dignity through the WCC and regional, national, and local ecumenical bodies was evident since the assembly in Nairobi. This was recognized by the 6th Assembly of the WCC. The assembly in Vancouver, which reflected on the theme "Jesus Christ, the Life of the World," reaffirmed the WCC's common commitment as a fellowship "to work even more fervently for the elimination of all forms of inhumanity, brutality, discrimination, persecution and oppression, both within our own countries and situations, and in ecumenical solidarity on a regional and world level."

A Statement on Human Rights adopted at the assembly in Vancouver highlighted "the cooperation that emerged in the field of human rights between the Christian community and peoples of other living faiths and ideologies, based on their common commitment to human values and social goals."[14] Drawing on the experiences and lessons from the past, it was further stated that "following [the] assembly in Nairobi, the churches have seen the need to broaden their understanding of human rights to include the right to peace, the right to protection of the environment, the right to development and the right to know one's rights and to struggle for them."[15] It was also stated that human rights cannot be dealt with in isolation from the larger issues of peace, justice, militarism, and disarmament. The assembly in Vancouver reiterated the WCC's position and commitment to human rights and appealed to the churches to dedicate themselves with renewed vigour to the task of raising the consciousness of the people concerning their profound responsibility for the implementation of human rights and for the demonstration of their biblical foundation.

The assembly in Vancouver noted that as discrepancies inevitably exist between what has been professed and what is being practised, there is a need to move beyond making declarations about human rights and duties to making more effective use of existing mechanisms and to devising, where necessary, new means for meeting the challenge. To work for the implementation of human rights, the delegates of the assembly in Vancouver, in a statement adopted on human rights, urged the WCC and its member churches to continue their practice of a pastoral approach, which combines prayer, preaching, and practical efforts in action. The need for more practical

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14. International Affairs at the Sixth Assembly World Council of Churches, Background Information, CCIA, 1983, 20.

15. International Affairs at the Sixth Assembly, CCIA Background Information, 1983/4.

approaches to strengthening human rights advocacy by the ecumenical movement was emphasized in a statement adopted by the assembly in which the following specific initiatives and areas of involvement were proposed:

- additional financial resources to be made available for the churches to carry out human rights programmes

- announcement of an International Day of Prayer for human rights

- creation of a "world action week" for the education of church members and promotion of human rights

- establishment of a series of regional and global review conferences to evaluate the work done by the churches in the field of human rights

- appeal to all governments of the world to adopt and ratify intergovernmental instruments of human rights

The recommendation of the assembly in Vancouver called for continuation of the WCC's Human Rights Programme and the Human Rights Advisory Group (HRAG), with a more clearly focused mandate to be maintained to assist the churches. As early as 1977, the CCIA decided to establish a Reference Group on Human Rights within the commission and adopted terms of reference with an aim to deal with the global concerns of the WCC in the field of human rights. The mandate of the HRAG was revisited, and a new mandate was given to meet annually to review, assess, and propose specific areas of action and implementation through ecumenical coordination. The function of the advisory group has been always effective in order to carry out human rights advocacy and address emerging human rights concerns. Responses to emerging human rights concerns in countries and regions across the world were addressed on the recommendation of the advisory groups from time to time. Ecumenical responses to human rights situations in countries such as Korea, the Philippines, Indochina, Lebanon, El Salvador, Armenia, Marshall Islands, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Sri Lanka, East Timor, South Africa, Sudan, Ethiopia, South Atlantic (Falklands/Malvinas crisis), and Zimbabwe were articulated. More specific emerging issues also were the focus of the Advisory Group: for example, the Indochina conflict, militarism and human rights, globalization, genocide in Rwanda, and rights of Indigenous people. The 7th Assembly held in Canberra, Australia, in 1991 more specifically expressed the rights of the Indigenous people of Australia, the Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Island people, and their struggle for survival.

The HRAG was re-established within the CCIA in accordance with the decisions and recommendations adopted by the WCC central committee in 1984. Terms of reference were adopted in a meeting of the CCIA in January 1985. Priorities in the human rights work of the WCC were further identified and sharpened by HRAG in its meeting held in Glion, Switzerland, in January 1986. These meetings emphasized the need for giving new impetus for the WCC's human rights agenda, especially in close contacts with programmes of churches and ecumenical bodies at the local, national, and regional levels, particularly the regional ecumenical organizations (REOs), such as the AACC, CCA, PCC, CCC, MECC, CLAI, and CEC, and North American ecumenical bodies, such as NCCUSA and CCC.[16] The collaboration with REOs in implementing human rights programmes has been effective for the CCIA's strategic initiatives. The creation of the Churches' Human Rights programme for the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act, a programme co-sponsored by the Conference of European Churches, NCCUSA, and Canadian Council of Churches became a model for such joint actions. The opportunities for providing accreditation to representatives of churches and ecumenical bodies to attend the sessions of the UN Human Rights Commission and UN Human Rights Council have birthed effective collaborative ecumenical actions in the WCC's human rights advocacy during the past several decades.

Major areas of human rights concerns for which special attention was needed as part of the WCC's human rights work after the assembly in Vancouver have included Southern Africa, the Middle East, Central America, the Horn of Africa, Indochina countries, the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Namibia, Uganda, Lebanon, Cyprus, Granada, Nicaragua, El Salvador, New Caledonia, Fiji, Poland, and the USSR.

In Latin American and Caribbean contexts, renewed repressions and human rights violations continued in the 1980s. Three fresh developments posed serious challenges to churches and other actors in these two regions where human rights situations became complex: the repressive actions of the military, the crushing debt crisis, and the increasing narco-economics. The solidarity team visits organized by the WCC in affected areas and countries, especially the physical presence of representatives of WCC member constituencies, have been of great significance to churches faced with vulnerable situations, such as those in El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, Chile,

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16. CCIA, The Churches in International Affairs: Reports 1983–1986 (Geneva: WCC, 1987), 32.

Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Honduras. Pastoral team visits organized by the WCC to other regions and countries, such as to the Philippines, Taiwan, and South Korea, helped churches to experience solidarity support amidst the struggle for human rights.

The WCC's human rights work following the assembly in Canberra was carried out at a time of radical transformation of history and geo-political changes. These included the collapse of communism in the USSR and throughout the Eastern bloc, the genocide in Rwanda, as well as several other situations where human rights have been under grave threat. The era after the Canberra assembly was also a period in which religion became a more consistent factor in conflict as well as an integral part of a growing trend of ethnocentrism and nationalism, which were causes for massive human rights violations in many parts of the world. It was in such a context that the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights met in Vienna, Austria, in 1994. As part of the preparation for the World Conference on Human Rights, three regional preparatory meetings (PrepCom) were organized by the United Nations in 1992 and 1993: in Tunis (Africa), San Jose (Latin America), Bangkok (Asia), and a common final meeting in Geneva.

At the Regional PrepCom meetings, CCIA participated through the representatives of the REOs and shared ecumenical experiences in dealing with human rights issues in different parts of the world. The debate at those meetings focused on the following issues: the notion of the universality of human rights, the right to development as an inalienable human right, the right to national sovereignty, the right to self-determination, and the rights of women and Indigenous people. The discussion on these issues resulted in polarization between the countries of the North and the South. For the South, the notion of universality became problematic, as the participants argued that the universality of human rights should be defined within the context of the culture and tradition of a particular country or region.

It was clear from the debates about the universality of human rights and the right to development that these were not new issues in the ecumenical agenda on human rights. The representatives of the ecumenical movement who attended the Vienna Conference recalled the ecumenical agenda on human rights discussed in detail at the 1974 St Pölten Consultation. The participants of that consultation, from all the regions—North and South, and East and West—debated the issue of universality of human rights and the right to development in a similar context. At that time, too, two different views were expressed on the issue. The first held that economic, social, and

cultural rights were not rights in the same legal sense as others and should be dealt with by Christians in the context of their understanding of service and charity. The second view was that though God cares for each individual, salvation itself is the reconciliation of an individual to communion with God in the fellowship of the people of God. There can therefore be no priority of the individual over the community, since the separation of the individual from the community is equivalent to separation from the Holy Spirit, which is equal to sin and death. This position insists that collective rights take priority over those of the individuals. Over the years, the ecumenical movement has broadened its understanding to accept the interrelatedness of civil and political rights as well as socio-economic and cultural rights.[17]

On the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the UDHR, the UN organized a World Conference on Human Rights, held in Tehran in 1968. In view of the significant changes in international affairs recognized by the 4th Assembly of the WCC, held in Uppsala that same year, the WCC central committee called for a review of ecumenical policy on human rights before the 5th Assembly was held in Nairobi in 1975. A quarter of a century beyond the assembly in Uppsala, and again in connection with a UN World Conference held in Vienna in 1993, the WCC central committee called for "a global review of ecumenical human rights policy and practice" to harvest the learnings of that period and to explore new challenges.[18] The CCIA had organized and facilitated consultations and review meetings for more than four years in collaboration with different REOs.

- An elaborate process of reviewing the involvement of the WCC in human rights identified several main areas of contributions to the ecumenical agenda on human rights. As a result, the review process evolved strategies to:

- deal with human rights abuses, especially in bringing victims of torture to the Human Rights Commission and its working groups to give personal testimonies

- facilitate the direct testimonies of family members of disappeared persons in international fora

- make it possible for direct representation of church-related human rights defence groups from different parts of the world to bring their own cases to world attention through the UN

17. "Human Rights: A Global Ecumenical Agenda," part II, WCC /CCIA, June,1993.
18. Report of an international ecumenical consultation convened by CCIA, Morges, Switzerland, 23-27 June 1998.

- develop expertise in cooperation with other international human rights organizations in pressing for new international standards, like those contained in the "Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Being Subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment of Punishment"

- advocate for new mechanisms in the field of forced disappearances and "Summary and Arbitrary Executions," as well as international efforts to abolish the death penalty.

The consultations organized in various regions on a Global Review of Ecumenical Practices and Policies on Human Rights identified priorities for future ecumenical advocacy initiatives:

- *Human rights education*: Importance should be given to human rights education, and struggle against poverty should be a priority (Latin America region, Quito, Ecuador, 24-28 October 1994).

- *Rights of migrant workers*: Protect the rights and dignity of migrant workers; develop the interrelatedness of the theological concept of reconciliation without undermining the struggles of the people for human rights; recognize the need for fostering interreligious actions for human rights work in the Asia and Pacific regions; support the struggles for self-determination of the peoples in the colonized countries and regions such as East Timor, West Papua, Kanaky, French Polynesia, Bougainville (Asia and Pacific regional meeting, Bangkok, Thailand, 14-17 November 1994).

- *Capacity building on human rights*: Initiate capacity building on human rights advocacy of churches at the grassroots levels; increase efforts that help sensitize and inform the public and the churches on human rights issues; interfaith dialogue on human rights (Middle East regional meeting, Cyprus, 30 November-4 December 1995).

- *Interventions and lobbying*: Engagement in legal and political actions need to be taken, lobbying for the promotion of national and international legislation for the protection of human rights; developing networks with churches and NGOs for sharing of human rights concerns; encourage mutual support and joint actions of the REOs on specific human rights issues (European regional meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, 29 May-2 June 1996).

- *Role of religion in conflict*: Take initiatives for conflict resolution; create forms of Truth Commissions; develop ways to strengthen global human rights through new institutions; add right to peace as a separate right in the Human Rights Agenda; peace-making should include peace-keeping and peace-building (North America regional meeting in the US, New York, 27-29 September 1996).

- *Establish linkage between local and international*: Increase linkage between those engaged in human rights on an international level and those engaged in addressing human rights violations in the local context; encourage and ensure broad participation at all levels of human rights work; link human rights work to the wider development agenda (North America regional meeting in Canada, Crieff Hills Community, Canada, 4-6 December 1996).

- *Support the establishment of effective networks*: Equip the church to stand with the marginalized majority and the impoverished in their struggle for human rights; support the building of a holistic community that is not dichotomized; manifest exemplary courage in resisting oppression and provide sanctuary for victims of human rights violations; the church should use its moral authority to protect women, children, and non-combatants in war situations (Africa regional meeting, Nairobi, Kenya, 28-30 May 1997).

At the jubilee 8th Assembly of the WCC, held in Harare in 1998, it was decided to recommit to the principles of the UDHR and to promote and defend the values of human rights and human dignity that emerge from the rich heritage of people's religions, cultures, and traditions. The indivisibility of human rights—including social, economic, cultural, civil, and political rights—and the rights to peace, development, and the integrity of creation was reaffirmed as a priority concern while dealing with human rights. The assembly in Harare also emphasized the need to pursue the goal of encouraging and supporting the efforts of the UN, seeking cooperation with peoples of other faiths and convictions, and joining in partnership with other civil society groups and organizations.[19]

The assembly in Harare addressed the new challenges to human rights of peoples, communities, and individuals resulting from globalization of the economy, culture, and means of communications, including the erosion of

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19. CCIA, The Churches in International Affairs: Reports 1995–1998 (Geneva: WCC, 2004), 48–52.

the power of the State. The major concerns highlighted in the Statement adopted by the 8th Assembly of the WCC were:

- the indivisibility of human rights
- the politicization of religion
- the universality of human rights
- global ethics and values related to human rights
- human rights and human accountability
- prosecution against violations of human rights
- elimination of the death penalty
- human rights and peace building
- human rights and human responsibility
- overcoming religious intolerance
- religious freedom as a human right
- the rights of women
- the rights of uprooted people
- the rights of Indigenous peoples
- combatting racism as a violation of human rights
- rights of people with disabilities
- interfaith cooperation for human rights
- human rights education
- peace building and human rights

These eventually became priority areas of the WCC's human rights work in the period after the assembly in Harare.

Ecumenical priorities and responses to human rights concerns after the Harare assembly were truly noteworthy. The WCC's human rights agenda was focused on addressing the emerging human rights situations in different parts of the world, such as in Angola, Congo, Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, East Timor, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Haiti, Bolivia, Cuba, Romania, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Argentina, Chile, Columbia, Guatemala, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, and Fiji. Many political issues were posing

major challenges to human rights for the churches; the ecumenical movement responded to them locally, regionally, as well as globally. Among these country situations, human rights in West Papua became a major concern of the WCC. Arising from West Papua's integration and the associated transmigration programme, a comprehensive record of human rights violations was documented—from the denial of economic and cultural rights to detention without trial, torture, and extra-judicial killings. The WCC was deeply disturbed by the deteriorating human rights violations in the West Papua region; several fact-finding missions and pastoral solidarity visits were organized by the WCC with ecumenical partners. Religious minorities and human rights situations in Eastern and Central Europe, religious minorities in the Islamic countries, and human rights amidst religious conflicts also became priority concerns in the WCC's human rights agenda in the years leading up to the 9th Assembly of the WCC, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Given the dissatisfaction at the functioning of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), a number of UN member states called for reforms. The WCC strongly supported a reform of the UNCHR in 2006. For over 60 years, the UNCHR played a unique role in developing universally accepted standards for promotion and defence of human rights. It was the highest global body responsible for overseeing respect for human rights by national governments. One of its major tasks was to monitor violations around the world and act on them during its six-week annual session in Geneva. Despite structural flaws and funding problems, the UNCHR continued to work effectively for the promotion and defence of human rights. However, the work of the UNCHR was virtually paralyzed by practices and policies of double standards and politicization of the human rights agenda by member States, including bloc voting by the regions.

When the secretary general decided to set up a high-level panel whose task was to propose overall reforms of the United Nations, including the UNCHR, the 9th Assembly of the WCC also focused on the reform of the human rights agenda. The assembly in Porto Alegre adopted a Statement on UN Reform, focusing on the need to ensure the quality of the United Nations' work to fight for human rights, justice, and peace. The WCC recalled its long association with the work of the UNCHR from the beginning of its formation, and the statement provided essential learning points on the ethics of solidarity through the relationship between the WCC and the UN.

The executive committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Geneva from 16 to 19 May 2006, underscored the importance of the UNCHR reforms in the following terms:

> Stresses that reform of the UN human rights architecture must result in an improvement of the capacity of the UN to engage with and make a practical positive difference in the lives of victims of injustice, discrimination, and oppression around the world. The system of Special Procedures developed by the Commission on Human Rights, of the UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies as well as of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and her office should be actively supported, and their independence respected, and their capacity substantially enhanced.
>
> Urges member states to avoid politicising the composition of the new Human Rights Council and give it a status within the UN architecture that reflects the central importance of human rights as one of the three pillars of the UN system. Members of the UN Human Rights Council must demonstrate through their policies, actions and domestic and international human rights record a genuine commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, including the economic, social, and cultural rights. Being a UN member state or even a permanent member of the UN Security Council does not by itself meet this criterion.[20]

The WCC urged member churches to continue to encourage and support the efforts of the United Nations in strengthening the links between peace and security, development, and human rights—and, in this connection, continue to work closely with the newly formed Human Rights Council to promote and defend human rights, including monitoring and compliance by the states of internationally accepted human rights norms and standards.

Following the assembly in Porto Alegre, when the WCC undertook a restructuring of its programmes, human rights advocacy, and capacity building of churches in the regions and at the national levels again became a priority. A series of capacity-building training programmes were organized and facilitated by staff in different regions with a focus on human rights to uphold human dignity. The history of at least 60 years of ecumenical

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20. Statement of the executive committee meeting of the WCC, Geneva, Switzerland, 16-19 May 2006.

cooperation around human rights work shows continuous attention to the concept of human dignity. However, it was not self-evident that this concept urthered ecumenical dialogue as well as dialogue with other religious and philosophical traditions in in-depth ways. But the new human rights agenda of the WCC focused on deep theological reflections on human rights and human dignity as well as a specific contribution of Christian theology toward a wider debate on human dignity.

A global consultation held in Geneva in December 2007 brought together regional representatives, and a second study consultation with the participation of interreligious representatives was held at Bossey, Switzerland, in 2008 to help provide new impetus and deeper understanding on the concept of human rights and human dignity as well as mutual collaboration in human rights advocacy. Although it has not been part of the CCIA mandates, other programme areas of the WCC were also focusing on issues related to human dignity and human rights. For example, a special programme focused on the dignity of children was a prime mover for promoting the human rights and human dignity of children. Rights and dignity of the Indigenous people and the disabled also became part of other programme units but were not confined within the framework of the human rights programme of the CCIA. The churches' engagement with human rights and human dignity has a long theological tradition and prophetic witness. The underlying theological assumption of active concern for promoting and protecting human dignity, especially of those who are suffering, is the belief that all people created in the image of God constitute an inextricable unity. The WCC always underscored this theological principle.

The years between 2009 and 2013 until the assembly in Busan witnessed a substantial increase in human rights programmes as the human rights agenda of the WCC was expanded during this period. More attention was given to facilitate the participation of member churches and related organizations at the UN Human Rights Council sessions as well as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a unique State-led, peer-review process mechanism of HRC. It is aimed at reviewing and examining the human rights record of each UN member state every five years and helping improve the human rights situation on the ground in each of the member states. When 42 States are reviewed each year during three Working Group sessions dedicated to 14 States, the CCIA facilitates the participation of different churches as well as civil society organizations. In addition to that, side events with a focus on specific human rights situations as well as country situations were also organized jointly

with other international NGOs and regional ecumenical organizations. The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), launched by the WCC in 2007, became a human rights advocacy priority as conflicts, violence, and human rights violations in the occupied territories continued to be a major human rights problem.

The CCIA meeting held in Durres, Albania, in October 2010 identified new programme priorities for the period until the next WCC assembly, to be held in 2013. The specific programmatic emphasis identified for the WCC's human rights work included dignity and rights of migrants and migrant workers, rights of stateless people, rights and dignity of children and women, support to strengthen national systems for the protection of human rights, and human trafficking. The relationship between religious freedom and human rights was also emphasized.[21] Programme policy recommendations emerged as an outcome of the discussions at the Albania meeting, and the CCIA leadership forwarded several specific recommendations to the WCC central committee through the programme sub-committee, which proposed "That the WCC programme related to migration be refocused on the dignity and rights of migrants, including migrant workers, forcibly uprooted persons and communities, stateless persons, climate refugees, people fleeing religious persecutions."[22]

Considering the deteriorating human rights situations in countries such as Iraq and Colombia and in the Middle East, the Albania meeting decided to focus its human rights advocacy in these places and to address the concern of freedom of religion and rights of religious minorities in countries such as Romania, Poland, Armenia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Cuba. As a follow-up to the decisions in the 50th meeting of the CCIA, the following matters were addressed: advocacy against the blasphemy laws and persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan; peace, security, and human rights in Latin America, Africa, and Asia; stateless people in Asia, with a special focus on stateless Rohingyas in Bangladesh; and rights of migrant workers in the Arabian Gulf countries.

Since the Albania meeting of the CCIA, the human rights of stateless people became a focus of WCC's human rights work. The Albania meeting of the commission discussed the plight of stateless people in different parts of the world, an issue which was rather less known or less addressed at that time.

21. Proceedings of the 50th meeting of the CCIA, 2-8 October 2010, St Vlash Monastery, Durres, Albania.
22. Proceedings of the 50th meeting of the CCIA.

Stateless persons, who are not recognized as nationals by any State, have no nationality or citizenship and live in vulnerable situations. As stateless people living in a particular geographical area are not protected by any national legislation, the consequences of their situation are profound. Statelessness, which affects all aspects of life, is a massive problem for 12 million people in different parts of the world. The CCIA identified this concern as a focus of its advocacy initiatives in the coming years and mandated the newly formed Working Group on Migration and Statelessness to address it.

The first international consultation with a focus on the human rights of stateless people was organized by the CCIA in 2011 and held in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Prior to the consultation, four teams of participants had the opportunity to visit camps and communities of stateless people in different parts of Bangladesh and Nepal. This helped them to understand the miserable life situations of stateless people—the Rohingyas and Biharis in Bangladesh, and Bhutanese and Tibetans in Nepal. The group, which visited Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, where a large number of Rohingya stateless people were concentrated, listened to sharing by Rohingyas themselves about their vulnerable situation. As early as the 1990s, nearly a quarter of a million Rohingyas had fled from Myanmar into neighbouring Bangladesh to escape persecution. The WCC was the first international church and ecumenical organization to initiate advocacy on the plight of the stateless Rohingya people, who are predominantly Muslims.

The Dhaka consultation on Human Rights of Stateless People affirmed the biblical and theological basis for prophetic witness on human rights and dignity of stateless people and communities:

> We pondered on the question as to why churches and Christian bodies should be concerned about stateless people. The Bible itself bears witness to the stateless condition of the Hebrew people and God's involvement to facilitate for them a homeland and therefore statehood. A popular Confession of Faith among the Hebrews was: "A wandering Aramean was my father: and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us to this place and gave us this

land, a land flowing with milk and honey." (Deut. 26:5-9). Not only the Israelites but other people and communities who experienced statelessness, were also the concern of God: "Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Captor and the Syrians from Kir?" (Amos 9:7) is another reminder of God's promise. God gave them all a homeland and thereby statehood.[23]

A second international consultation on Human Rights of Stateless People was organized by the CCIA in Washington, DC, US. It suggested that:

> The issue of statelessness must be addressed in a comprehensive manner. The states must confer citizenship to prevent and reduce statelessness and protect the basic human rights of citizens and stateless people alike. Faith communities, civil societies, NGOs, and stateless persons will work together to advocate for the remedy and prevention of future statelessness. It is within the power of God the creator, the God of salvation and the Spirit of God that infuses us, to bring justice and peace to stateless persons.[24]

The recommendations by the Dhaka Consultation as well as those by the Washington, DC, Consultation gave new impetus to the CCIA to present an emerging concern of statelessness and rights of stateless people, whose plight was less emphasized or addressed by the international community at that time. A statement adopted by the 10th Assembly of the WCC, held in Busan, South Korea, called for "churches to raise awareness of the situation of stateless people living in their countries and around the world and to advocate for the protection of their human rights. The assembly asked "the WCC to take up the issue of stateless people as one of its programmatic priorities until the forthcoming WCC 11th Assembly."[25] The decision of the assembly was introduced in the post-assembly programme structure of the WCC; the work in this area has been carried out through the mandates of the CCIA.

The UN Advocacy Week (UNAW) initiated by the CCIA since 2007 has been a major priority in the human rights advocacy agenda, highlighting human rights situations in different parts of the world. The UNAW was

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23. Statement of the CCIA international consultation on Human Rights of Stateless People, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2011.
24. Mathews George Chunakara, ed., Human Rights of Stateless People (Geneva: WCC, 2013), 16.
25. Statement on 'Human Rights of Stateless People', International Affairs at the Tenth Assembly Statements, Minutes and Resolution, CCIA (WCC: Geneva, 2013), 21.

organized annually with the aim of ensuring the ecumenical movement's active participation in advocacy at various levels, as well as facilitating the capacity building of churches and ecumenical councils in advocacy. The UNAW started organizing a week-long event, initially in conjunction with a major UN event in New York; it was shifted to Geneva in 2010. The focus of the UNAW in 2010 was on human rights situations in Nigeria and in Palestine and Israel, but a focus on human rights in Myanmar was added. UNAW-2010 was organized in conjunction with the UN Human Rights Council session.

It was the first time that the WCC was able to address the Myanmar human rights situation ever since Myanmar (Burma) came under a military dictatorship in 1962. Although the WCC has been concerned about the authoritarian military dictatorship and the rampant militarization and human right violations going on in the country for decades, it was not possible to condemn the human rights violations openly through a statement or in UN human rights bodies, as churches in Myanmar feared possible retaliation by the military junta there. The initiative to include Myanmar as part of the UNAW in 2010 was a new beginning for the WCC's open involvement in human rights advocacy in Myanmar. In 2012, the CCIA organized a consultation with the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in Yangon, with a focus on peace and reconciliation in Myanmar. Ang San Suu Kyi, who was not then allowed to move around freely even within the country, managed to attend and even spoke at the CCIA/WCC and CCA joint meeting.

The human rights situations in Columbia, Guatemala, Myanmar, the Philippines, West Papua, Cambodia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Democratic Republic of Congo were priority concerns of the WCC leading up to the Busan assembly. In addition to UNHRC interventions, and the accompaniment of churches in their participation at the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process of UNHRC, the CCIA organized numerous solidarity visits to areas where human rights have been under threat.

Religious freedom and rights of religious minorities have been constantly under threat in different countries. As decided at the Albania CCIA meeting, a working group to monitor the situation of freedom of religion was constituted. Special attention has been given to the initiation of a study on the freedom of religion and rights of religious minorities in selected countries. The Working Group on Religious Freedom and Human Rights organized

two study consultations: in Istanbul, Turkey (2011), and in Thessaloniki, Greece (2012). The preliminary report of the study process was presented to the 51st session of the CCIA, held in Nanjing, People's Republic of China, in June 2012. An expert meeting held in Havana, Cuba, in June 2013 finalized the study report, which was presented to the 10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan in October 2013.

Since the Albania meeting of the CCIA, the Working Group has been reviewing various country situations where religious minorities have been persecuted. An international hearing on the Misuse of the Blasphemy Law and Rights of Religious Minorities in Pakistan, organized by the CCIA/ WCC from 17-19 September 2012, was a major ecumenical advocacy event which was attended by about 100 participants from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, including 23 representatives of Christian, Muslim, and Hindu groups and civil society and human rights organizations from different parts of Pakistan. The hearing provided opportunities for participants to listen to, analyze, and understand the complex situation of the rise of religious fundamentalism and extremism and the misuse of the Blasphemy Law in Pakistan, which has led to blatant violations of human rights.

Since 2008, the CCIA has been involved in advocacy on the impact of the misuse of the Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan. Various central committee and executive committee meetings of the WCC issued statements on deteriorating human rights situations in Pakistan:

- Statement on the Crisis in Pakistan, central committee meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, 13-20 February 2008

- Statement on the Misuse of the Blasphemy Law and the Security of Religious Minorities in Pakistan, central committee meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, 26 August–2 September 2009

- Minute on the Current Situation in Pakistan, executive committee meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, 14-17 September 2010

- Statement on Abductions, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages in Pakistan, central committee meeting, Kolympari, Crete, Greece, 28 August–5 September 2012

A statement on the Politicization of Religion and Rights of Religious Minorities adopted by the assembly in Busan specifically mentioned that "in a country like Pakistan, the politicization of religion by military dictatorships, introduced through changes in the penal code, systematized the misuse

of Blasphemy Law which is now a major instrument used by the religious extremists against the religious minorities in the country."[26]

Ecumenical advocacy with a focus on human rights over the past 75 years has moved to embed the insights of various consultations, studies, and methodology to strengthen mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement. The ecumenical movement has worked to expose the abuses of anti-democratic, authoritarian, and military regimes and to deny legitimacy to them. The methodologies and practices followed over the decades have included:

- the promotion of solidarity among churches

- studies of specific causes of human rights abuses, including systemic issues such as the link between militarism and human rights violations

- workshops and training programmes for church-related human rights workers, church leaders, and others in the regions in cooperation with regional and national councils and churches

- dialogue encounters

- regionally focused initiatives, especially in Latin and Central America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Middle East

- cooperation with other specialized international non-governmental organizations

- the provision of assistance to local and national churches and groups engaged in the struggle for human rights, and to victims and their families

- the sending of delegations to critical situations to express solidarity and to offer pastoral accompaniment to churches and people in crisis, and to investigate the nature and causes of massive human rights violations

- interventions with governments on behalf of threatened persons and groups

- facilitation of direct testimony in international forums, such as the UN Commission on Human Rights, by the victims of human rights violations

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26. Statement on the Politicization of Religion and Rights of Religious Minorities, International Affairs at the Tenth Assembly Statements, Minutes and Resolution, CCIA (Geneva: WCC, 2013), 10.

- contributions to the development of new international standards, showing the interrelationships between human rights, peace, and economic well-being and expanding the parameters of specific human rights protections to women, children, and Indigenous peoples, and to refugees, migrants, and internally displaced persons

- international advocacy by speaking out with or in support of churches in their prophetic role of critiquing the principalities and powers responsible for oppression, repression, and systematic violation of human rights

- the provision of training and sharing of expertise between regions on early warning and preventative measures on issues related to impunity, forgiveness, and reconciliation

During the past 75 years, since 1946, the ecumenical movement has, through its human rights work, confronted the realities and consequences of colonialism and racism, the brutal authoritarianism of national security regimes, the subsuming of human rights to national development objectives by national political elites, statelessness, and the imperatives of political loyalty generated by superpower rivalry and militarism. The threats to human dignity and human rights as well as various forms of political and economic dominance experienced by a vast number of people across the world have been major concerns of the churches as well as of the ecumenical movement as a whole. The churches and the ecumenical movement have learned many lessons during the period of human rights struggle.

A review of WCC's human rights work, analyzed after 50 years of its deep involvement, observed that

> with the end of the Cold War, the context has changed radically, but it offered opportunities for greater international cooperation in defence of human rights, but it has also intensified injustice, exploitation, and inequality in most parts of the world. The global entrenchment of the economic, political, and military domination of particular elites threatens peoples everywhere.

The WCC has been continuing its mission of prophetic witness in response to the emerging human rights agenda. The ecumenical movement and the churches have significantly expanded their human rights agenda by stimulating a wide range of new issues which were not previously considered

enough in the field of human rights. The WCC has consistently enabled the churches to clearly incorporate the ecumenical policy on human rights.

Some of the most pertinent issues the WCC has introduced as part of the ecumenical agenda in terms of human rights have been the rights of women; the rights of uprooted people—refugees, migrants, and internally displaced persons; right to self-determination; rights of Indigenous people; elimination of all forms of discrimination; economic and social justice; torture; forced disappearances; extra-judicial executions and the death penalty; rights of the child; impunity; ecological rights; religious intolerance; and restrictions of religious freedom.

The WCC has enabled its member churches to offer their solidarity with peoples in addressing human rights. An increased need for the churches to attend the emerging human rights concerns has been a priority. The WCC has been consistent in its policy of alerting the churches that they must continue to hold the state accountable to the people for the protection and promotion of the human rights but at the same time seek to transform and strengthen the state in ways which would enable it to perform its legitimate role. In many situations, member churches were equipped and enabled to be involved in effective human rights advocacy, particularly to collaborate with new human rights alliances and other civil society movements in the interests of equipping society as a whole to respect and defend the rule of law and international human rights standards.

While being engaged in human rights advocacy at various levels, the WCC is firmly rooted in its conviction that the churches should be equipped to strengthen the human rights instruments in their local contexts as well as at the regional and intergovernmental institutional levels of which they are a part. To facilitate such roles, the WCC has been initiating training in human rights advocacy, UN mechanisms, human rights instruments, and resource mobilization for human rights work. The WCC has reiterated its conviction from time to time that international humanitarian law applicable in times of war, and other relevant instruments of international human rights law, should be scrupulously applied. Especially to be condemned are armaments like anti-personnel mines, which inflict cruel and inhuman injury, and the forced recruitment of children into military service. The assertion that crimes against humanity cannot go unanswered was repeatedly made by the WCC, especially in the context of experiences of genocide in Armenia, Rwanda, Cambodia, and elsewhere. In the 1980s, the WCC did ground-breaking work on the causes, dynamics, and effects of militarism, militarization, and

their impact on human rights. This work contributed significantly to the development of new international standards and is reflected in them.

The global review of ecumenical policy and practice on human rights, undertaken in 1994 at the request of the WCC central committee, brought churches in all the regions together in a process of study and reflection. The consultation has reviewed the results of regional meetings and finds that there is much to be celebrated in the work of the ecumenical movement in support of those engaged in the struggle for human rights. But it was also observed that a great deal remains to be done to secure more effective protections, particularly for disadvantaged, vulnerable, and minority groups.

There is a marked increase, in particular, in violations of social, economic, and cultural rights of peoples. This situation has worsened during the last decade as a result of the rapid globalization of economies. This, together with divisions and conflicts within societies as a result of growing ethnocentrism, religious extremism, and nationalism, has torn societies apart and has often led to wars and massive human rights violations.

The emerging global trends and human rights trends pose a serious challenge to the churches in the years ahead. To counter these forces of evil and darkness, churches must renew and reaffirm their common commitment to the core values that uphold human life and dignity. The affirmation at the WCC's 6th Assembly reminded us that "The biblical vision of peace with justice for all, of wholeness, of unity for all God's people is not one of several options for the followers of Christ. It is an imperative of our times."

More than 70 years of struggle to promote human rights have made the churches aware of their strengths but especially of their weaknesses. It has led them to realize that it is not enough to react to situations where human rights violations occur. The root causes of violations must be addressed. The WCC and its member churches must embody in their own structures, for the full range of human rights, participation, accountability, and democracy, the respect that they demand of others, reaffirming that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated.

Widespread extreme poverty and growing social exclusion constitute violations of human dignity and continue to pose a serious challenge. Their alleviation and ultimate elimination must remain a priority for the churches, realizing that the root causes of these violations often lie in the unjust international order and in the incurring of huge military expenditures, which often lead to corruption of government officials and massive neglect of social

needs. This reminds us of the need to reaffirm the indivisible unity of human rights, democracy, and development.

During the past quarter of a century, new efforts were undertaken to promote and support education and training in human rights at regional, national, and local levels, including the strengthening of youth internship programmes and the recognition that education on human rights and dissemination of information are essential to the promotion of and respect for human rights. Special efforts were introduced to help in the implementation of established rights through the strengthening of civil society organizations and of national legislation and human rights institutions, including an independent judiciary committed to the rule of law. The WCC should continue to provide opportunities for churches to consider together priorities for work on human rights.