

A SOCIAL STATEMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS: DOING JUSTICE IN GOD'S WORLD

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God calls the church in every time and place to proclaim righteousness, to struggle against injustice, and to care for creation. It is therefore fitting that we in the Lutheran Church in America, as one embodiment of God's people in the world, declare our understanding of human rights and take our stand with all who work and suffer to advance freedom, equality, and justice in ways that more truly reflect God's intention for humanity.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

This is a time of rapid and radical change in every aspect of human existence. Such change is simultaneously awakening new hopes for a greater degree of justice for people and rendering the achievement of such justice increasingly problematic.

Dramatic achievements of human imagination and skill hold out the possibility of the virtual elimination of such chronic scourges as starvation, ill health, congenital defects, and ignorance. Men and women throughout the world dare to dream of a life for themselves and their children that is increasingly free of poverty, oppression, and disease.

Justice and human rights have become a concern that transcends national boundaries. The Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and numerous international agreements reflect the reality of this worldwide concern. The specialized agencies of the United Nations work quietly for the achievement of justice. Many voluntary organizations strive to expose injustice and to work positively for its elimination. The worldwide Christian community is becoming increasingly engaged in both direct ministry to oppressed persons and groups and in public advocacy for justice.

At the same time oppression appears to be more widespread and systematic. There are countless refugees from political tyranny and economic hardship. Imprisonment and torture are commonplace in many countries irrespective of ideology or political alignment. Persons of conscience, rather than being valued as resources to the community, are frequently treated as subversives by those in power. Privacy and due process are violated in the name of security. The practice of religion is often curtailed or prohibited, and the faithful are harassed, imprisoned, or even killed. The use of terror by both governments and private groups constitutes a serious threat to human rights.

Inequitable economic relationships deny to millions the basic necessities of dignified life. For the majority of the world's people starvation and disease are commonplace. Even in wealthier countries pockets of chronic poverty exist.

In all parts of the world there are institutionalized populations - in mental hospitals, nursing homes, and prisons - who languish without advocates. Many persons held in these circumstances are the very young or the very old; many, having little knowledge of their rights, are the objects of continuing victimization.

Racism, sexism, and discrimination against the handicapped - whether enforced by official policy or by cultural mores - are realities throughout the world.

The increasing vulnerability of a complex, interdependent, and technology-based world society is accompanied by increasing concern about security against disruption, sabotage, or destruction by private groups or alien governments. This legitimate concern for maintaining conditions of order and peace can easily become an obsession. There appears to be a growing culture of fear that pits the interests of security against those of human rights. The national security state, with its reliance on might and,

frequently, on repression rather than civil consensus, is more the rule than the exception in the community of nations.

There is a growing concern that the human ability to shape persons through increasingly subtle behavioral, physical, and genetic manipulation may tempt humanity to exchange freedom for a security based upon control. The election of such a course could alter radically the future of the human race.

There is the concurrent warning that the utter contamination, exhaustion, or destruction of the resources of the planet will deprive future generations of their rights.

The continuing polarization of East and West reinforces an ideological polarization in the understanding of human rights, pitting a false collectivism against an equally false individualism.

THE HUMAN: A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

In the face of this present situation we in the Lutheran Church in America declare our theological view of what it means to be a human being in order to state what we understand to be the rights of human beings. What follows is a statement of what we hold to be true in light of the divine Word about God and all humankind. This statement is cast as a confession of belief about God's intention for creation, followed by a confession or litany about our fallen state, which only those who have been laid hold of by God's Word can make. It speaks here of all humans, including Christians in the Body of Christ and within this church. Our confession of God's presence in the world likewise is a statement of faith; it also deals with all peoples in the Creator's world. Finally, we set forth a gospel affirmation of our vocation in Christ by which we are liberated and empowered to join in the struggle for human rights.

THE CREATOR'S INTENTION

We confess that God calls persons into being (Gen. 1:26,27). Female and male persons are equally created in God's image. They live by God's word of address to them; they are constituted by the relationship that word creates. Persons are created in and for co-humanity. The individual is not prior to the group, nor the group to the individual.

God's righteous will for persons is that they serve their Creator through responsible care for one another and for the creation (Micah 6:8; Ps. 8:6). We thus understand God's intention for "the human" to include responsible life in community with God and neighbor and faithful stewardship of the world's resources. No resource is the unqualified possession of the person or persons holding it. All is held in trust for the benefit of the whole human community and of future generations (Deut. 24:19ff).

The human struggle for justice is an ongoing one. The provisional forms of God's righteous will become evident in response to the concrete needs of people at particular times in history. The changing demands of justice are discerned in part by the inner witness of God's law in the human heart (Rom. 2:13-16). They are continually tested in social living.

A right is what justice requires in response to a particular human need.

It is necessary to distinguish between human rights and the legal entitlements and protections which flow from them. Human rights are *moral* assertions of what justice demands in particular historical situations. Civil, political, and economic rights are *legal* guarantees that have been established by governments.

Rights are formulated either positively or negatively. Some rights are entitlements to particular things or conditions which enable responsible life in community. Other rights are protections against the arbitrary and unjust use of power.

God has created persons in one human family (Acts 17:26). It is God's intention that persons should discover their mutual rights and responsibilities as they live together in community. Thus, individuals in community are prior to rights and duties. The proper end of rights and responsibilities is to serve the legitimate needs of persons in community.

Although persons differ as to endowments and circumstances, they are of equal worth before God. They are equally entitled to the things and protections they need to live in meaningful relation to God and neighbor.

Rights and responsibilities are interrelated. In exercising their rights, persons are responsible for the promotion of their neighbors' rights as well. Power of whatever kind carries with it responsibility for the protection and advancement of human rights.

OUR FALLEN STATE

We are willful, rebellious creatures. We are all equally guilty before God (Rom. 3:9-18). We do not fear, love, or trust God above all else, nor do we serve our neighbors as we ought. We are grasping, self-deceiving, and self-serving. We mask our appetites and privileges under the term, "rights," and we often perceive as "charity" our grudging accession to our neighbors' rights. We define our rights and duties as best suits our advantage. We are covetous and greedy; if we are not exploiters ourselves, we benefit from the exploitation done by our ancestors or by those agents of power to which we pledge our loyalty.

We hold onto the wealth entrusted to us as if it were ours by right for our private enjoyment (Amos). We assert ultimate title to what God entrusts to us, taking up arms to defend our possessions against a world hungry and in want. We substitute self-congratulating charity for the justice that God demands.

We make law and order ends in themselves or the means of preserving our privileged position.

We create invidious distinctions among persons, declaring some to be more human than others in defiance of the Creator who loves all equally. We erect barriers which separate race and race, sister and brother, poor and rich, in rebellion against God's holy will. We shut people out, we shut people in, we stigmatize, we stereotype.

We devour the resources of God's earth while millions go without sustenance, shelter, or other basic necessities.

We consume and contaminate with little thought for the rights of our children and future generations.

We allow our respect for institutions to degenerate into questioning obedience, especially when such respect serves our own self-interest.

As a church we often help to reinforce injustice. Our institutional arrangements frequently reflect prevailing patterns of oppressions; and the use we make of our corporate power seldom challenges the social *status quo*.

God's word of address to us becomes a word of judgment from which we flee (Gen. 3:8-10). The cry of those we oppress goes up to God, becoming the word of our condemnation.

THE CREATOR'S PRESENCE

The Creator lovingly preserves the world, however estranged it may be, through human works of civil righteousness.

We confess that within this fallen world God remains present and active, contending against our abuse of one another and of the power and resources entrusted to us. The Creator encourages and enables us and all people of good will to do works of justice. Human imagination, empathy, and mutuality are God's gifts which enable us to create and to preserve a measure of peace, justice, and community in this fallen world.

In the cries of outrage against injustice God's own voice of judgment is heard; in the political struggle against illegitimate rule. God's power is manifest; in the struggle to break down barriers of race, age, sex, and class, God is at work. Though ambiguous and mingled with the evidence of sin, these marks of God's governance give hope to the downtrodden and encouragement to all who strive for justice.

The Creator's presence is also discerned in the witness of the divine law, though obscured and distorted by sin, in the hearts of persons to know and to do what is civilly right, if not out of justice, then out of prudent self-regard. This limited capacity for justice, while it will not save persons ultimately, can preserve them temporarily.

The capacity for prudence and justice can establish reasonable conditions for the promotion of the common good of all the world's people.

OUR VOCATION IN CHRIST

God has redeemed us by the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ, has incorporated us into Christ's Body, the church, and has called us to loving service in the world. God calls us to serve, both corporately and individually, in the ongoing struggle for justice and human rights.

Corporately as the church, and individually as Christians, we participate in this struggle not out of a love of power but by the power of the divine love for the whole world. In Christ we have been freed from a preoccupation with our own rights in order to give ourselves to the securing of justice for our neighbors in the worldwide human family.

For this task we do not claim special competence or insight. Frequently we require instruction from the knowledge and experience of persons who are not themselves Christians. Our identity lies not in our knowledge but in the New Being that is ours in Christ and in the lively hope that is ours for the fulfillment of God's promises.

We are empowered by God's Spirit to perform our vocation in the world under the sign of the Cross. In the Cross we see God's power victorious in apparent defeat; by that Cross we are able, in the face of the evil that permeates the world and ourselves, to persist in the struggle for justice, bearing witness that God has not abandoned this fallen creation.

As God's liberated people, we are free to advocate the rights of persons without fear or favor. We have a special duty to be skeptical and vigilant about the exercise of power by governments and institutions and to be humble and self-critical about our own interests and attitudes.

When temporal authority performs its legitimate function of securing human rights, we can thankfully support it (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13f); when it does not, we can just as freely work for its reform or replacement and, if need be, disobey or resist it (Rev. 13), accepting the consequences of such action.

Because our Christian community is worldwide and transcends differences of nationality, political ideology, culture, physical condition, and race, we can be effective partners in the task of strengthening the growing world constituency of conscience which, with increasing effectiveness, is calling to account the holders of power, both public and private, for the deprivation of human rights. Both within our own countries and around the world we have the God-given responsibility to contribute to a powerful and effective community of caring for all who suffer injustice. We are especially called upon to work for the rights of those "forgotten ones" who are otherwise without voice or power.

THE HUMAN AND HUMAN RIGHTS

There exists in the biblical revelation no definitive body of human rights. Rights are historically and politically expressed through the stewardship of God's gifts of reason and power for the sake of justice in community.

A right is usually stated without qualification. In its application, however, it frequently comes into conflict with other rights and human necessities. Such situations are to be considered after, not before, a right has been articulated.

On the ground of God's revealed disposition toward and intention for the human family, we submit the following assertions regarding facets of human reality and some of the principal rights implied by them at this time.

In specifying these rights, we choose to develop the basic aspects of human relationship which undergird the Ten Commandments.

HUMANS HAVE BEEN CREATED FOR DIVINE RELATIONSHIP

All have the right to worship, or not to worship, without constraint or coercion by government or private agency.

No state, group, or person may command ultimate devotion or obedience. Persons have the right to protection against all such usurpations of the Place of God.

All have the right to celebrate, practice, and witness to faith through communal and public acts of devotion and service without fear of interference of persecution.

Governments have no right to legislate in matters of religious belief, but they may legitimately legislate in balancing the claims of the free exercise of religion and the safety and welfare of the general society.

HUMANS ARE CREATURES AND CREATORS OF SYMBOL AND MEANING

All have the right to free expression through verbal and nonverbal communication, to participate in the exchange of ideas, and to create works of art.

All have the right of defense against communication considered to be debasing of human dignity and inciting to destructive or immoral behavior.

No one has the right to control the mind, will, or conscience of another person.

All have the responsibility to create and communicate meaning in a spirit of civility with a view to preserving personal liberty and promoting the common good.

HUMANS ARE FAMILIAL AND POLITICAL BEINGS

All have a right to a personal identity and a spiritual heritage.

All have the right to protection against abuse, exploitation and neglect.

All children have the right to parental care and affection.

Parents are entitled to respect, affection, and care from their children.

Families are entitled to protection from forces that would tear them apart.

Older adults are entitled to the opportunity to continue as participating members of society.

Older adults should not be denied, because of circumstances beyond their control, adequate housing, sustenance, or health care.

Future generations have a right to their share of the world's resources and to a legacy of justice and meaning.

The state exists to secure and promote the rights of its citizens through prudent and just legislation, administration, and adjudication.

Communities have the right to establish institutions for the purpose of achieving the conditions of security and welfare and of controlling their goods and their temporal destinies.

Persons have the right to participate in the determination of how, by whom, and to what ends they will be governed.

All have the right to equality before the law and to protection from the arbitrary use of power.

HUMANS ARE PHYSICAL CREATURES

All are entitled to the basic necessities of healthful physical existence and/or to the means of securing them.

All are entitled to the protection of life and physical well-being.

No person or agency has the right to inflict gratuitous pain upon a person.

HUMANS ARE SEXUAL BEINGS

Human sexuality is a gift of the Creator for the expression of love and the generation of life.

Through sexuality, God enables persons to give themselves, and to receive from others the gifts of personal comfort, joy, faithfulness, and commitment.

Sexual union is intended by God as a means of achieving communion between men and women within the covenant of marriage.

Persons are not intended to be a means to the end of selfish gratification.

No one has the right to debase sexuality by abstracting it from personal relationship, by making it a commodity for consumption, or by using it as a commercial inducement.

HUMANS ARE STEWARDS OF CREATION

God has given the wealth of creation as a trust for the benefit of the whole human family in an independent world.

All have the right to those resources and opportunities required for full participation within society, economy, and political system.

All have the right not to be reduced to a status of dependency upon charity or largess.

All are entitled to equal access to the opportunities and resources of a society.

All are entitled to a healthful environment.

No person, business enterprise, government, or other human agency holds ultimate title to the resources it controls. Private property is not an absolute right. Goods and abilities are held in trust from God and are to be allocated and used for justice in community.

All have the right to be heard by those who make decisions affecting the quality of their life.

All have both the right and the responsibility to participate productively in the economy in ways that contribute to the advancement of justice and well-being for the total society and all its members.

Workers have a right to participate with employers in determining the just return and the conditions of labor.

On one has the right to deprive neighbors or future generations of life by selfish and profligate consumption.

HUMANS ARE NAMED-PERSONS

All have the right to a good name and reputation.

No one has the right to defame another person or to advance one's own interest through the misuse of another's name.

No public or private agency or individual may stigmatize a person through the misuse of personal information.

CONCLUSION

We confess that humans are created in God's image. God intends human beings for divine relationship and for community with one another in mutual service. Human beings have rights in order to fulfill the intention of their Creator.

Our concern for human rights arises from God's call to the faithful to participate in the care of creation and in the advancement of justice.

In responding to that call, we work in partnership with all persons and communities of good will to seek, articulate, and advocate the rights of all persons, particularly those without voice and power of their own. We seek to strengthen a constituency of conscience that transcends national boundaries and other arbitrary human distinctions.

When the powers of this world work to reduce the bearers of God's image to the status of spectator, prisoner, or victim, may we be empowered to bear witness to that lively justice which is God's holy intention for the entire creation.