

79-GS-31 VOTED: The Twelfth General Synod adopts the Pronouncement on Human Rights as revised:

## **THE PRONOUNCEMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS**

The Eleventh General Synod in its Resolution on Human Rights directed the Office for Church In Society "to draft a major pronouncement on Human Rights for the Twelfth General Synod." The Office for Church In Society appointed a national advisory committee, including representatives from other national agencies, minority caucuses in the United Church of Christ, seminaries and ecumenical agencies, to aid it in carrying out this directive.

### I. The Core Problem

#### *Human Rights from the Christian Perspective*

Human Rights are the gift and demand of God. They have their source in what God has done and is doing in creation, in Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit. In every age God calls upon people to proclaim the righteousness and justice in the world. God creates, reconciles and redeems everything that is. Thus human rights are universal demands. No person, no group, no society is excused from recognizing the claim that other human beings must be treated justly and that societies must be ordered on the basis of freedom and equity.

When the Church of Jesus Christ has faltered in proclaiming and enacting God's righteousness, other advocates of human rights have stood up throughout the world. They have pointed to a universal moral law to be implemented in all civil orders. Different societies have understood human rights differently and have thus conferred civil rights in different ways. Universal moral law confers human rights that are diversely implemented in the civil orders. Thus, civil rights are subject to legislative acts or political fiat. Human rights, however, are God given and are not alterable by persons, groups or regimes. All persons and all civil orders are under moral obligation to develop policies, programs and politics which recognize basic human rights.

#### *Human Rights Today*

In recent years human rights have become a world-wide concern. The attention stems in large part from increased understanding and recognition of human rights and increased awareness of the widespread violation of human rights. We witness in many locations a growing division between declaration and implementation, recognition and realization, codification and enforcement, rhetoric and establishment of human rights. There is a growing awareness that human rights are decisive not only for the quality of human life but also for the very existence of human life.

We rejoice over what has been accomplished toward creating sound international legal standards since the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in

1948, but we realize that legal standards alone, however universally declared, are not enough. When we raise the questions of human rights today we are also raising the question of the power to realize them and of the powers that prevent their realization. To be committed to human rights means to be committed to the transformation of those values which shore up inhuman systems and the transformation of those systems which spawn inhuman values.

We further realize that standing up for human rights means becoming actively engaged in the struggle for human rights. We have to be willing to sense human misery in its various forms and to be able to suffer with the suffering of others. We have to refuse arguments which set out to rationalize or justify human misery, especially when these causes stem from our own interests and lifestyles. In this way we announce that we are ready to enter into solidarity with all those who struggle for human rights by working for the liberation of persons.

Today there are at least five dimensions of human life in which we hear the cries of those suffering from violations of human rights.

- (1) In many parts of the world people are crying out from political oppression and yearning for the recognition of their right to determine their own future through participation in the decision-making of the community. They are demanding recognition of the right to the integrity of their person which involves the right to life, dissent and freedom from torture. Under the concept of human rights no civil order may deprive persons or groups of their rights to conscience, to speech, and to assembly by employing reasons of "national security," "true religion," or "political expediency."
- (2) We hear the cries of those suffering from economic exploitation and pleas for the right of human existence in the face of hunger, unemployment and unjust economic systems. Human beings are demanding the right to the basic necessities of life: food, shelter, clothing, humanly satisfying work with just remuneration, health care and personal ownership of what is necessary to dignity and freedom. Both developed and developing societies are spawning economic values that determine the allocation of scarce resources in favor of the rich. While the right to property is essential to the well-being and the development of the human person, the principle of ownership can never justify accumulation of wealth by the few that produces poverty for the many.
- (3) People are crying out from cultural alienation and yearning for the right to maintain and enjoy their cultural identity. Persons suffering from racism, sexism, ageism and prejudice against the handicapped are demanding their right not to be humiliated by the cultural definition of others. In many societies today the most vulnerable people are prevented from claiming their names, their languages, their histories and their cultural identities by dominating cultural, political or social forms. People are calling out for a chance to contribute to the community and to develop their capacities for creativity. Human beings have a right to educational opportunity and to cultural forms which express their memories and their hopes. They have a

right to the freedom to form and maintain families and to create meaningful relationships.

- (4) People are crying out together with all creation against the misuses and/or ignorances of technology which are destructive of the relationships between humanity and habitat. The partial realization of our technical utopias has created unimagined possibilities for freeing human beings from disease, hunger and pain, but it has also created horrifying possibilities for the destruction of nature as well as the manipulation, repression and dehumanization of our own bodies. Because human beings are part of nature, a violation of the rights of nature is also a violation of human rights. Human rights entail a protection of natural resources and the environment for the sake of future generations.
- (5) People are crying out from despair and lack of meaning in their lives and yearning for the right to be in open relationships with what they consider to be the source of life. Of primary importance in human rights is the freedom of religion. People have the right to the freedom of faith, the right to public worship and the expression of faith in teaching, criticism and practice. It is a human right to participate in communities of faith which are free to influence persons to righteousness and to exercise prophetic witness in society. The freedom to relate to what one believes to be the ultimate source of life should prevent the idolatry of society and self.

All of these dimensions of oppression and human rights are interrelated and interdependent. It is quite possible in specific actions to focus on one or another dimension. Under God's righteousness, however, it is impossible to be concerned about human rights without committing oneself to rights in all of these dimensions. At the same time we concentrate our efforts on specific problems, we must become engaged in relation to the total dimensionality and global context of human rights. There is today no single issue of human rights which is not ultimately global in character.

We acknowledge that there are diverse traditions of human rights which stem from different histories. For example, in the Western industrial nations where the struggle has been to limit the powers of rulers, individual freedom has been given primary stress. In the Eastern socialist countries, on the other hand, where the principal struggle has been against poverty, economic welfare rights have been central. These concepts of human rights are not mutually exclusive but are complementary. Both, however, can be used to exercise dominating political power to repress either individual or social rights. In some countries still dominated by hunger and poverty, the proper emphasis is on the right to existence itself. Because human rights questions are in fact global, the struggle for human rights must take all of the diverse perspectives into serious consideration.

As Christians in the United States we affirm our history of struggle for democratic and civil rights of the individual. We may not give up the gains which have been

made in this history or the valid emphasis on the rights of the individual and the community *over* against the state. Our task is to use this democratic tradition to spread civil and individual rights into the economic, cultural and natural dimensions. We commit ourselves to the best in our tradition.

As Christians we also confess our own failures to achieve a society which fully protects the human rights of all of our citizens. We have been lacking in diligence and commitment to correct the systematic violations of human rights in some of our laws and institutions. We have been deaf to the anguished cries for help by those whose rights are violated because they hold unpopular views, pursue unconventional lifestyles, belong to powerless groups or are deprived of the resources with which to protect themselves. We confess that our lack of passion for human rights has led to economic crises, racial and sexual discrimination, food shortages, waste of resources, pollution of the environment, and inadequate care of and community with the handicapped and the aged. We confess that we have sometimes used the concept of individual rights as a false ideology of individualism to justify the unjust distribution of the necessities of life. Our freedom from the constant struggle for the basic necessities of life has degenerated into a compulsive dependence on exaggerated, destructive patterns of consumption. We have tried to bolster our own economic situation by an unbridled search for markets and raw materials overseas and by massive arms sales and investments in support of regimes which use them to enhance their own privileges and systematically and grossly violate the human rights of their own citizens.

## II. Biblical and Theological Foundations of Human Rights

Human Rights are grounded in God's act of creating, reconciling and redeeming the creation. This act is called God's righteousness and power to make God's creatures alive against the power of death. As creator of everything God has a claim upon everyone and everything in creation. God comes to human beings in the person of Christ to judge, to forgive, to restore, and to justify us, in other words, to make us alive in the power of God's life or to make us righteous in God's sight. Human rights are promises and commands of God to make and keep God's creatures abundantly alive. Thus human rights are not grounded in static reality, in legal contracts, in the integrity of the individual or state, or in the nature of things. Rather they are grounded in God's faithfulness to man. This relationship of God to creation gives all human beings their in- alienable human right.

This righteousness which God expresses in creation, reconciliation and redemption is the basis of God's covenant. Human rights are live and realizable in this covenant context. They are alive in actual historical relationships in which God accepts human beings and human beings accept, hope for and *love* each other. Rights must be not only declared and codified, but also must be cared for, nurtured and embodied in covenant relationships between persons, groups, nations and between human beings and nature.

All human beings have equal human rights by virtue of their being created in the image of God. Because of God's claim upon all God's creatures human rights have to do with the basic answer-ability or responsibility of being a human creature. To be created in the image of God means to be called to be God's representative to the creation. It means to be called to care for God's whole creation according to God's intention. Therefore the fundamental human right which gives the human being his or her dignity is also an obligation: to serve and to help in the creation or the conditions for life in the whole creation. The fundamental human right is the right to be responsible to God. Human rights and human duties are two sides of the same coin. "My rights" is an abstraction and in reality nothing without the "rights of my neighbors," which constitute my duty. In view of God's claim upon God's human creatures, rights are given by God as the means for all human beings to fulfill their duties before God's righteousness.

Thus human rights are what people need to order to fulfill their fundamental task of becoming a human person, that is, fulfilling their calling as the image of God. No person, organization or state has the right to violate the right and dignity of being human in another human being. To do so is a sin against God; it is an attempt to frustrate God's will for the life of God's creation. As a function of God's righteousness human rights shape history. They give structure and form to human relationships that serve the systems of life as opposed to the systems of death. They are guides to and forms of the conditions of life. Where they are disregarded, there will be death.

The conditions of life which God is seeking to create through God's own suffering *love* are freedom, justice, equality, peace and recognition of God's glory. These are the conditions under which human rights are realized. Human sin, the reality of evil in the world and the power of death are constantly working against God's creation and producing human suffering. Thus our work for human rights is grounded in God's *new* creation. God the Holy Spirit is making present the liberating power of the messianic mission of Christ and the new creation of God's future. It is out of the righteousness which God is suffering to create in our midst that we struggle and work for the realization of human rights.

In the struggle for human rights there is no way to avoid conflict between groups, especially between the rich and the poor, the powerful and powerless. The message of reconciliation as the Word of the Cross does not remove these conflicts. It does, however, seek to bring into the midst of the conflicts the fundamental promise of the Gospel that the ultimate goal is the reconciled community within the one family of God.

In the midst of the struggles we will affirm that the power of freedom comes through the free grace of God. God's involvement in the midst of the historical struggle is the reality which prevents despair from failures and overwhelming frustrations in attempts at realizing human rights. At the same time the presence of God's grace keeps us from a compulsive slavery to our self-justification through works.

### III. Call to Study and Action

We have affirmed that our concern for human rights arises from God's grace and the call to be faithful participants in the care of creation and the realization of justice. In response we work in partnership with all persons and communities of good will to articulate, advocate and realize the rights of persons, particularly those without their own voice and power.

Responding then to God's call, the Twelfth General Synod commits itself to the struggle for human rights and

- (1) Calls upon all members of the United Church of Christ to study and reflect upon the biblical and theological basis for our commitment to human rights.
- (2) Calls further on the members of the United Church of Christ to advance the cause of human rights through the social and political processes available to them in their vocations as citizens at work in the world.
- (3) Urges that our churches, church-related agencies, associations, conferences and national agencies be sensitive to the human rights of persons within our own church institutions and their spheres of influence and, where there are violations, to seek to remedy them.
- (4) 4. Calls upon churches, church-related agencies, associations, conferences and national agencies of the United Church to devote personnel and financial resources to denominational and ecumenical human rights programs that will enable the United Church of Christ to:
  - a. seek ratification of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other Human Rights Conventions approved by the United Nations and submitted by the President of the United States to the U.S. Senate for ratification.
  - b. affirm the protection of human life, condemn the needless loss of life, including murder and the judicial death penalty, and encourage the continuing study of the difficult ethical questions in any deliberate termination of life.
  - c. participate in the corporate social responsibility movement to exert pressure on business corporations and government agencies, through a range of shareholder actions and recommendations to public officials, to end U.S. economic complicity in the human rights' violations of repressive governments;
  - d. be aware of new developments in the continuing struggle for human rights and to respond appropriately, with special attention given to the rights of future generations in relation to the government;
  - e. participate in ecumenical bodies, coalitions, movements and other organizations which work in behalf of human rights through the world in terms consonant with this Pronouncement;
  - f. bring strategically important aid to victims of human rights violations through its own services agencies and through various ecumenical assistance programs;

- g. request an agency of the Church to develop a course on human rights for congregations; and
  - h. encourage the closely related seminaries to reflect this pronouncement in their total curricular endeavor.
- (5) Requests specifically that the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, the United Church Board for World Ministries, the Commission for Racial Justice and the Office for Church In Society continue to give priority attention to human rights in their mission programming.
- (6) Commends to the churches, church-related agencies, associations, conferences and national agencies of the United Church of Christ, the study and consideration of the Petition on Human Rights Violations in the United States to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, submitted by the Commission for Racial Justice of the UCC and others.

*Call to the Nation*

In accepting its own responsibility for participation in the struggle for human rights and recognizing the responsibility of the people of our nation to become concerned with these critical dimensions of the human rights efforts, the Twelfth General Synod:

1. Calls upon the people of our nation to press our governmental bodies - municipal, state and federal - to address more vigorously the continuing problems of social, economic and judicial injustice in our own country, affirming the rights of all people to earn a living, correcting those conditions which prevent full equality of opportunity or deny the reality of equal treatment before the law.
2. Calls upon the people of our nation to insist that our federal government
  - a. phase out systematically all existing involvements in the support of foreign governments that objective international investigations have found guilty of gross and systematic violation of the human rights of their own citizens;
  - b. assume its special responsibility for the defense of human rights in dictatorial countries deemed of strategic importance to our military and economic security;
  - c. end both military and economic assistance, and especially programs of intelligence and police training, wherever the regimes in power practice torture, arbitrary detention, and the systematic denial of freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly and of petition for the redress of grievances, including the right of workers to organize for collective bargaining and to resort when necessary to work stoppages in their quest for fair compensation and working conditions.
3. Calls upon the people of our nation to pursue the efforts to seek ratification of the multilateral United Nations human rights treaties which have been

- approved by the United Nations, signed by the President of the United States, and submitted to the U.S. Senate for ratification.
4. Calls upon the people of our nation to urge the President of the United States to sign the United Nations Optional Protocol on Civil and Political Rights (provides procedures for petition by individuals) and submit it to the U.S. Senate for ratification.

The Twelfth General Synod of the United Church of Christ requests the President of the Church to communicate this Pronouncement to the President and the Congress of the United States, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and the National and World Councils of Churches and their respective member communions.