

## HOW CAN CHURCHES HELP TO PROMOTE AND IMPLEMENT HUMAN RIGHTS?

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### **Summary**

*Churches see the struggle for human rights as a gospel imperative. Their pastoral and diaconal work enables them to speak authoritatively about human rights abuses at the grassroots. The Churches' work for human rights must be not only pastoral and diaconal but also prophetic. Their detailed local knowledge as well as their access to government makes it possible for them to campaign effectively against human rights abuses.*

The point of entry into the human rights discourse for the Churches was probably the right to freedom of religion. This is the right that Christians claim for themselves - the right that is fundamental to the free practice of our faith. At the same time, it cannot be denied that, over the centuries, dominant Churches have used their power and their proximity to the seats of political power to restrict the freedom of certain religious groups and indeed to persecute them. This is an area of human rights where Churches have been both victims and perpetrators. So while we celebrate the freedom of religion which we enjoy in Europe today, we must at the same time remain alert to any remaining restrictions on that freedom and be willing to defend it against any renewed attempts to limit it.

However, Churches came to recognise that freedom of religion cannot be protected in isolation from the whole package of human rights. Human rights are an entity; they stand or fall together as an indivisible whole. Churches recognise, therefore, that they should not restrict their involvement in the human rights movement to the protection of their own sectional interest as religious bodies. They are aware that they have a clear duty to engage in the struggle to protect human rights as a whole.

For Christians, it is nothing less than a gospel command to struggle for the rights of others, particularly those least able to stand up for themselves. The Bible reminds us that Christ himself comes to us in the form of others in need: the hungry, the sick, the stranger and the prisoner (Matthew 25.31-46); and that if we "hunger and thirst for righteousness" we are assured of the blessings of the Kingdom (Matthew 5.6).

It thus comes as no surprise that the Charta Oecumenica commits European Churches to engage in the struggle for human rights:

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*On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace; justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail.*

However just as "charity begins at home", so should human rights begin within the individual Churches. The Churches' actions in the field of human rights will not carry conviction unless they demonstrate respect for human rights in their own internal affairs and procedures. As human rights are to a large extent a matter of guarding against the abuse of power, we need to ensure that the powers of Church leaders and authorities are exercised in accordance with the principles of natural justice - which has not always been the case in the past. For example revelations about the sexual abuse of children in the context of the Churches have been immensely damaging for their witness to human rights. This has led Churches to introduce much more stringent procedures to minimise the risk of such scandals in the future.

Churches are not, of course, alone in struggling for human rights. We do not aspire to lead or control the human rights movement, but – as in the title of this section – to "help promote and implement human rights". Very often, therefore, Churches and Christian organisations find themselves working in close co-operation and partnership with secular human rights movements and other associations. While there will be specific human rights issues where we disagree with some organisations, as a general rule we find ourselves able to identify strongly with the struggles and concerns of other bodies. As Churches we bring our deep commitment to the wider human rights movement together with our grassroots experience of daily life in every local community throughout Europe. We also have the possibility of access as institutions to government and the media.

### **The Churches' pastoral and diaconal service**

Pastoral ministry brings clergy and others into constant contact with the daily lives, problems and crises of the people whom they serve. Pastors are admitted into people's homes and the intimate spheres of family and personal life. Through these contacts they will become aware of human rights abuses. They will meet victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, they may see evidence of cruelty to children or injustice at the hands of the authorities. In cities and urban areas especially they will find migrants and refugees among their congregations, because the Church is sometimes the only place where these groups find a welcome.

In these cases the primary responsibility of pastors is to offer spiritual and practical support and comfort. They may also be able to put people in touch with social services or non-governmental support organisations, and should indeed be aware of where appropriate help is to be found in their locality.

Clergy and other Church leaders may also need to educate their congregations about the realities of human rights abuses. They need to help people overcome their prejudices and fears concerning foreigners, the members of minority groups or groups which are socially marginalised or despised (e.g. asylum-seekers, single mothers, HIV/AIDS victims, ex-prisoners, prostitutes and many others).

Pastoral work is chiefly about meeting the needs of Church members, but charitable or diaconal work for the benefit of people in need in the wider society often follows. Because of their intimate knowledge of people's lives in their local community, clergy and Church members very often become aware of human rights abuses of which others remain ignorant. Churches are in the front line of need in their societies. As such, they are often able to play a pioneering role in identifying current forms of human rights violations and in developing practical forms of support and assistance. Some recent examples are the growth of trafficking in Europe and its extension to such abuses as organ theft. Therefore, Churches, often working alongside other associations and voluntary organisations, are now involved in developing initiatives such as drop-in centres for the

poor, the homeless or the unemployed, shelters for victims of domestic violence, advocacy and advice services for migrants, refugees and victims of human trafficking, and so on.

The resources at the disposal of Churches are limited. Work of this kind often needs to be taken up on a larger scale by the State or local government, and the Church will then be prepared to hand over its work to official bodies. On the other hand, human rights victims may be more comfortable working with non-governmental bodies, and services may possibly be provided more effectively and flexibly by non-governmental actors than by official bureaucracies. For a variety of reasons, all concerned will thus sometimes prefer an "arms-length" approach in which governments provide funding for services which continue to be delivered by the Churches or other non-governmental bodies.

### **The Churches' prophetic witness**

While the pastoral and diaconal service offered by Churches is fundamental to their mission, it is not enough on its own. Those whose human rights have been abused do need our Christian charity, but people in need should not be seen only as victims or passive recipients of help. A Christian approach needs to go beyond charity to rights. Rights represent an affirmation of the dignity of each human person. A rights-based approach is, moreover, a preventive approach. Instead of just dealing with human need as it appears, we give people the legal protection they require in order to avoid them becoming victims of human rights abuses. It is not enough merely to treat the symptoms of human rights abuse. We have a duty to tackle the causes, to work for laws and structures that will extend and further human rights in the future.

The Church's witness to human rights must be not only pastoral and charitable but also prophetic. There are a number of reasons why Churches are well placed to exercise a prophetic role. In the first place, our extensive knowledge of local situations and problems and our experience of helping individual victims enable us to speak with authority and knowledge of the human rights abuses we encounter. Furthermore Churches are often well placed to play an advocacy role, to act as a voice for the voiceless, particularly as they traditionally have a degree of privileged access to government. Such privilege can be used as an opportunity to "speak truth to power", to raise the awareness of those in the positions of authority of unwelcome realities they would prefer to ignore.

**Although most European Churches do not have the social influence they once did, they still enjoy a public visibility which can enable them to raise awareness of the ways in which human rights are being disregarded. They can appeal to the conscience of the public and campaign for effective measures to right wrongs and injustices. Their combination of grassroots knowledge and public visibility can be used by Churches to campaign effectively for a response to human rights abuses. For example, Churches can rightly claim to have played a part in pushing problems such as poverty and its many causes, human trafficking and the plight of asylum-seekers higher up the agenda of European governments.**

Today where the context for legislation and policy-making is determined more and more, especially in Europe, by international institutions, this prophetic witness can only be effective if it is exercised at the international level as well as at the national and local levels. Where the European Union and other European intergovernmental bodies are concerned, European Churches now find it imperative to work together through organisations such as the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches.

There are many ways in which Churches can bring their views to bear on international human rights questions. They can use the possibilities open to non-governmental

organisations to work in coalition with other NGO's through the EU consultative mechanisms and the NGO participatory structures of the Council of Europe. Staff working for the Churches at the European level can brief national Church leaders about the strategic moment to intervene with national governments to try and influence their positions in international bodies, for example by ratifying human rights instruments.

A number of pre-conditions must be met if the Churches' prophetic witness to human rights, both at national and international level, is to be effective. Firstly, it needs to be ecumenical: governments cannot cope with a plethora of religious interlocutors. A united ecumenical approach has greater credibility. Credibility depends also on professionalism. Churches need to be well informed and skilled in communicating their concerns to governments and to the public. Their witness needs to be based on a combination of good research and convincing evidence drawn from their grassroots experience. They also need to be sufficiently informed about the decision-making process, both at national and at international level, so that they know when to intervene, with whom to intervene and how to intervene.

Being professional means being sufficiently resourced. At present when financial resources are scarce, it becomes even more important for Churches to pool their efforts, to work together ecumenically. Moreover Churches need to recognise that they cannot carry out an effective prophetic witness to human rights without a minimum of well-informed and expert staff.