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THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

A COMMUNION OF CHURCHES – EINE KIRCHENGEMEINSCHAFT – UNA COMUNIÓN DE IGLESIAS – UNE COMMUNION D'ÉGLISES
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**Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits
March 21-24, 2009, Bangkok, Thailand**

The Bangkok Declaration and Call¹

1. The Declaration

1.1 Introduction

The Dalit Samaritan woman asked Jesus, “Where can I find this living water?”²

We came together as almost 100 participants, the great majority from churches and Christian bodies across the world, with advisers from other faith communities, to address the largest systemic violation of human rights in today’s world, caste-based discrimination (CBD). As Dalits and friends of Dalits we came from caste-affected countries, mostly India, but also Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nigeria, as well as from other countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North America and the Pacific. We were called together by the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). We gathered on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (March 21). We were hosted by the Church of Christ in Thailand, to which we express our gratitude.

We were addressed by Dalits and representatives of other communities experiencing inherited social exclusion, activists, academics, bishops and church leaders. We engaged in Bible study, worship and prayer which created a strong foundation both for understanding caste and our call to action. We discussed, debated, learned and built a great sense of solidarity around our total rejection of CBD. We all learned more about Dalit history and culture, Dalit women’s experience, recent atrocities such as those in Kandhamal, Orissa³ and Khairlanji, Maharashtra⁴, and growing Dalit

¹ This document was prepared by a group of ‘listeners’ on behalf of the participants of the conference. These were: Mr. Dennis Frado, USA, Rev. David Haslam, UK; Rev. Roxanne Jordan, South Africa; Dr Mikko Malkavaara, Finland, Rt Rev. Dr Isaac Mar Philoxenos, India; and Rev. Robina Winbush, USA. This was done to enable them, as friends of Dalits, to formulate their own responses in solidarity with Dalits and in the light of their experiences during the conference. The conference discussed the document, agreeing to its intent and structure and proposing some changes to the content. Two younger Dalit activists, Ms Rama Devi Hansraj and Rev. Raj Bharat Patta then joined the listeners group to work on further amendments to the document, before handing it over to the organizing staff group for final editorial revisions.

² John 4:11

³ Dozens were murdered, many injured, and property destroyed and looted following the 23 August 2008 murder of the leader of the militant Hindu organization, VHP, in the Indian state of Orissa. However, what was generally described as Hindu-Christian inter-communal violence expressed underlying caste tensions. The rampage that radical VHP followers went on after the murder (for which Maoist insurgents claimed responsibility) targeted Christian communities. Most Christians in the Kandhamal, Bargarh and Koraput Deogarh districts of Orissa are Dalits or Adivasis (tribal or indigenous people). State and federal governments and law enforcement authorities stood by and

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resistance to CBD. We were told that “Dalit” is the chosen name of the former “untouchable” communities which although it means “crushed” signifies their resistance and hope.

At the opening worship, it was said, “Today, regardless of where we come from, which church we represent, we all become Dalits. Not only for today and during this conference, but also for our life until Dalits are liberated, we all become Dalits.”

And, with sadness and anger, we heard many stories of the suffering of Dalits - murder, rape, mutilations, beatings, humiliation, extreme poverty and the daily grinding discrimination and exclusion that is the lot of so many millions of Dalit people.

1.2 The Confessions

We were reminded in challenging and sometimes emotional terms of the continuing prevalence of caste in the church and the silence of the church in addressing caste both inside and outside the church. The representatives of the churches of the countries more directly affected by caste⁵ wished to confess their complicity with CBD and to acknowledge that caste remains deeply entrenched in their churches today. This is manifested in leadership struggles, use of resources, unwillingness to challenge the authorities and failure to support victims of caste atrocities. These representatives also confessed the prevalence of patriarchy in their churches - which both reinforces casteism and creates double exclusion - and also their failures to support struggles for justice elsewhere.

The representatives of the churches in less-affected countries (LACs) and the wider ecumenical family wished to confess their ignorance with regard to CBD, their failure to study or explore this systemic oppression and their failure to accompany churches and communities suffering CBD.

During the meeting we were reminded by our Southern African colleagues of the declaration in the midst of their liberation struggle that “apartheid is heresy” and that “racism is sin”. Likewise, we too wish to confess that “caste discrimination is a crime” and that “casteism is sin” because it contradicts the Christian teaching that all are created in the image of God.

In this document we speak primarily about CBD, but we recognize CBD is a product of the caste system, which Dalits believe needs to be annihilated to end social injustice, oppression and exclusion.

waited for days before reacting to the violence. Only after four days was a state of emergency declared.

⁴ On 29 September 2006, four members of a Dalit family in Khairlanji village of the Indian state of Maharashtra's Bhandara district were raped, mutilated and bludgeoned to death by fellow villagers. The ‘provocation’ for this attack was the fact that members of this family were educated and asserted their right to a life of dignity despite their poverty. When the sole surviving member of the family reported the crime, the police showed a characteristically disinterested and even contemptuous attitude to the investigation.

⁵ A debate emerged concerning the terminology of “caste-affected countries” (CACs) and “less-affected countries” (LACs). Some preferred alternative expressions such as “more directly affected countries” and “differently affected countries”. However, all agreed that caste, casteism and caste-based discrimination affect not only those South Asian countries most often associated with these phenomena, but is a truly global concern. This conviction is based on (i) the Christian understanding of *communio* – with the suffering of one member of the body of Christ affecting the whole body, (ii) a general ethical understanding of relationships in community, and (iii) the salience of caste throughout the South Asian diaspora globally.

1.3 The Acknowledgements

Firstly, we acknowledge that our primary concern is with India, as here about 200 million⁶ people are affected, but we are also concerned for the millions⁷ in other countries discriminated against on the basis of caste -- or "work and descent" as the United Nations (UN) calls it -- including in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka as well as the Buraku community in Japan, the Osu community in Nigeria and similar communities elsewhere, whose experience and expression of struggle differs. For example, Dalits in Nepal are currently battling for proper recognition in the new Constitution. Many of our recommendations have particular reference to India.

We also acknowledge that CBD is a reality today resulting in routine social exclusion and discrimination; extreme vulnerability to violence; sexual abuse against Dalit women and children; trafficking; discrimination in schools and institutions of higher education; lack of access to disaster relief and mitigation measures; exclusion from markets, water sources and public services and public places; and reprisals when Dalits demand equality and justice. This is a systemic discrimination which permeates structures of governance, media and the criminal justice administration.

Secondly, we wish to acknowledge and to recognize the failure of the international community to address CBD. For those countries with involvement since colonial times, especially Britain, this failure dates back centuries. It includes the conditions under which independence was negotiated and subsequent political and economic relationships. The international community's common failure was most clearly revealed in the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban, where over 200 Dalit activists sought to raise CBD, and the international community turned a deaf ear, to its shame and disgrace. Because of the collusion of other governments with the Indian government, the international community declined to address caste there and at many subsequent UN meetings.

Thirdly, we wish to acknowledge the additional sensitivities raised by this issue in the context of interfaith dialogue between Christians and Hindus. We acknowledge the right for all to preach, profess and practice their faith. We reject extremism and religious fundamentalism in every faith. We welcome interfaith dialogue that confronts casteism and upholds human dignity, especially Dalit liberation.

***Our God who is present everywhere, particularly in the struggles of our people,
Let your name be proclaimed by our acts of justice and truth,
Help us to realize your sovereignty by being in solidarity with one another,
Inspire us to do your will – to resist, confront and transform, as you have,
Give us daily your grace to share our food, resources and ourselves with others, as you
shared your life with us,
Lead us not into the temptation of practising caste and being self-centred,
Deliver us from all kinds of oppression and discrimination
For your reign, power and glory shall come unto us when all of us live in the spirit of
community governed by the values of dignity, mutual respect and equality.
Amen.⁸***

⁶ This figure includes 166 million (government statistics, 2001) plus Dalit Christians and Muslims.

⁷ Some global estimates place the total number of Dalits and members of similarly-affected communities at 260 million.

⁸ The prayers in the boxes at the end of each section of this document are based on worship materials used at the conference in Bangkok.

2. The Call

We present this Call in the name of justice for and solidarity with Dalits.

2.1 The churches of CACs

We call upon you to:

- (i) recognize and repent of your casteism, and eradicate it within the churches;
- (ii) identify yourselves as churches in full solidarity with the Dalit movements and to speak with a united voice in working towards Dalit liberation;
- (iii) identify casteism as an ecumenical issue and locate it in the existing ecumenical bodies, and widen and deepen ecumenical cooperation in addressing this issue;
- (iv) create affirmative action policies and programmes for Dalits within the churches and their institutions at all levels (governance, management and employment), with specific programmes for Dalit youth;
- (v) publicly condemn violence against Dalit women and set up programmes to combat this violence;
- (vi) continue or develop programmes of education and awareness-building in relation to CBD, inside the churches and outside;
- (vii) continue or develop programmes to monitor caste atrocities and to act immediately to support victims, human rights defenders and witnesses;
- (viii) encourage the expression of Dalit culture in worship, liturgy and theology;
- (ix) call upon theological colleges to take up the Dalit issue effectively in their curricula and other academic activities;
- (x) address and eliminate patriarchy for the sake of both women and men;
- (xi) challenge your governments for their inaction -- in national and international contexts -- on effectively addressing the practice of CBD; and
- (xii) support the national and international campaign for the elimination of 'manual scavenging'⁹ by the end of 2010.¹⁰

⁹ 'Manual scavenging' is the manual removal of excreta ('night soil') from 'dry latrines' (i.e. toilets without a flush system). This is a traditional occupation of Dalits, and is still performed almost exclusively by Dalits – especially Dalit women. Some states in India have passed laws to abolish manual scavenging, and the national Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993 prescribes penalties for the employment of manual scavengers or the construction of dry (non-flush) latrines of imprisonment for up to one year and/or a fine of Rs 2,000. However, manual scavenging persists throughout India (with an estimated 1.3 million Dalits still employed as manual scavengers), despite repeated government commitments to eradicate it.

¹⁰ The campaign for the abolition of manual scavenging has been led by Safai Karamchari Andolan, an organization working among manual scavengers, which has identified 2010 (when India will host the Commonwealth Games) as a target date for the final elimination of this degrading and dangerous occupation.

2.2 The churches of LACs

We call upon you to:

(i) develop urgently programmes of education and awareness-building in relation to caste and how it affects people of many countries;

(ii) join in the international campaign for the elimination of 'manual scavenging' by the end of 2010;

(iii) provide resources for solidarity work both in CACs and your own country, to support a sustained and long-term period of work, and to facilitate exchange and exposure visits in both directions, perhaps as 'Living Letters', urging all visitors from LACs to CACs to visit the Dalit communities and movements;

(iv) address your governments in relation to their trade and development policies, their role at the UN and related bodies, the European Union or other appropriate institutions, to contribute to international recognition of and cooperation to eradicate CBD; and

(v) urge private sector companies and banks investing in India and in other CACs to undertake the Dalit Discrimination Check¹¹ and to sign the Ambedkar Principles¹² for affirmative action and employment equality.

2.3 National and international ecumenical bodies

We call upon you to take up Dalit liberation and solidarity as a central mission objective, including circulating this statement to all member churches and seeking their response, and accompanying the Dalit movements:

(i) in CACs to initiate a process similar to that which led to the "Kairos Declaration"¹³ in South Africa, with Dalit Theology as the crucial element, to produce a major theological statement or declaration of a Christian position on caste, caste-based discrimination, and their relationship to the situation and struggles of Dalits by, say, 21 March 2010;

(ii) in LACs to create a structure whereby the proposals in section B above can be taken forward;

¹¹ The Dalit Discrimination Check (DDC) is a tool developed by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) to help companies prevent discrimination and exploitation of Dalits in their Indian operations and suppliers. The DDC can be downloaded at <http://www.idsn.org/business-csr/dalit-discrimination-check/>

¹² The Ambedkar Principles are a set of principles developed by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) concerning employment and other contexts in which Dalits suffer economic and social exclusion. They intend to acknowledge the degree of historic injustice against Dalits in South Asia and aim to compensate for this through affirmative action, in line with international human rights standards, although not to the detriment of other excluded groups. IDSN recommends that companies apply these principles in their business operations. The Ambedkar Principles can be downloaded at <http://www.idsn.org/business-csr/ambedkar-principles/>. The Ambedkar Principles are named after Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April 1891-6 December 1956), also known as *Babasaheb*, who was an Indian nationalist, jurist, Dalit political leader and Buddhist revivalist. He was also the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. Born into a poor 'untouchable' family, Ambedkar studied in New York and London, and spent his whole political life fighting against social discrimination and the Indian caste system.

¹³ The original 'Kairos' document was a Statement issued by a group of primarily black theologians in South Africa in 1985, at the height of the struggle against apartheid. It critiqued 'State theology', 'Church theology' and argued for a 'Prophetic theology'. It issued a 'Challenge to Action', caused considerable controversy and acted as a model for other Kairos documents, eg Central America, shortly afterwards.

(iii) in the international ecumenical bodies to develop further their on-going work on justice for Dalits and to collaborate in establishing a Global Watch on violence against Dalits, creating a communication system to all member churches and beyond; and

(iv) set up -- for the purpose of promoting follow-up to this conference -- an on-going task group (to be supported by the churches in the CACs and LACs) to consider the possibilities of (a) a review conference in five years' time, (b) a Decade to Overcome Caste and Exclusion to follow the Decade to Overcome Violence, (c) an International Dalit Sunday, and (d) all additional suggestions from this conference.

2.4 The Governments in CACs

While acknowledging efforts so far made to address CBD, we urge you to:

(i) protect your citizens and end the violence, acknowledge your failure to address CBD and the atrocities that accompany it effectively, and to refresh vigorously all programmes and resources (especially in the police and judiciary) aimed at dealing with this pernicious "blot on humanity"¹⁴;

(ii) engage with the UN human rights bodies and mechanisms to effectively address CBD;

(iii) guarantee the human rights of Dalits, and ensure that the independent voices of Dalits are heard in government and all national decision-making bodies;

(iv) expand and develop the education programmes already addressed to Dalit children and initiate new education programmes for children who are not Dalits to assist them in relinquishing their oppressive caste status;

(v) ensure justice for Christians and Muslims of "Scheduled Caste"¹⁵ origin in India by recognizing their "Scheduled Caste" status, which will provide them with better protection under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 and access to affirmative action policies and programmes;

(vi) pay particular attention to the needs of Dalit women in education, employment, land distribution, and the effects of violence;

(vii) calculate the costs of the free labour provided by Dalits, at least since independence, and add this to the budgets allocated to "Scheduled Castes" but often never delivered, to ensure full budget justice and transparency, and to prohibit non-voluntary free labour in the future;

(viii) establish an action plan with a timetable to eliminate 'manual scavenging'; and

(ix) engage with the campaign for Electoral Reform towards proportional representation for all communities.

¹⁴ Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, 27 December 2006, <http://www.hindu.com/2006/12/28/stories/2006122803521300.htm>

¹⁵ "Scheduled Caste" is official Indian government terminology for Dalits.

2.5 The International Community

(i) With feelings of dismay and outrage at the failure of the WCAR 2001 to address caste, we call upon you, even at this late stage, to offer a platform to those representing Dalit communities who will be attending and engaging with the Durban Review Conference in April 2009, and urge all participating governments to accept the inclusion of CBD in those discussions.¹⁶

(ii) While recognizing progress on CBD in bodies such as the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the International Labour Organization, we urge the UN Human Rights Council to ensure that the draft Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent, developed under the former Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, are adopted in order to provide a firm and appropriate basis for the whole international community to address CBD.¹⁷

(iii) We call on the international community to support the campaign for the elimination of 'manual scavenging' by 2010.

2.6 Dalit Communities

We call upon you to practice unity with steadfastness and courage, both inside and outside the churches, to avoid division by 'sub-caste' and leadership competition, and to present a broad-based and democratic front in the liberation struggle. We also call upon you to act in solidarity with other struggles for justice.

Lord we intercede

For those who suffer the violence of caste

For those who stand in solidarity

For those who raise their voice in protest

For those who are forced into silence

For those who act as if everything is normal

For those who overtly inflict violence

For all those who feel the pain

For those who benefit from the system

For those who are ignorant of the sin that is caste

For us, who commit to overthrow the system

3. Conclusion and Affirmation

Finally, we the participants in the Bangkok Conference of March 2009 reject any notion of hierarchies of oppression. We look for a caste-free world, in which the human dignity and rights of everyone is affirmed irrespective of their social origin and identity. This, we believe, is the living water for which the Dalit Samaritan woman asked. We reaffirm our commitment to Dalits and all other marginalized and

¹⁶ For more information on the World Conference Against Racism and the Durban Review Conference, see <http://www.un.org/WCAR/>, <http://www.un.org/durbanreview2009/> and <http://www.idsn.org/international-advocacy/un/durban-review-conf/>

¹⁷ For more information on the draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent, see <http://www.idsn.org/international-advocacy/un/un-principles-guidelines/>

exploited communities. This is the preferential option for the poor. We invite all those who receive this document to join with us in actions of solidarity to render human dignity and justice to all Dalits and to combat all injustice and inequality, in order to live up to our calling as “the beloved community”, the people of God.

*May the God in whose image we all are created,
guide us.*

*May the Jesus who ate with the impure, who touched the untouchable and who knew no
caste,*

encourage us.

*May the Holy Spirit whose power blew through the people of many nations so that they all
understood in their own language and others asked “Are they all Dalits?”,
inspire us.*

*May we all walk in the light, bound together in love and proclaiming those words written in
the soot –*

Jesus is alive!¹⁸

Issued for Passion Sunday 2009

‘When Jesus came in sight of the City he wept over it and said “If only you had known this
day the way that leads to peace!” Luke 19, 41-2.’

¹⁸ The phrase ‘Jesus is alive’ was found written in the soot of a burnt-out church building in Kandhamal in August 2008, where among other atrocities a Roman Catholic nun had been raped.