



THE
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A Communion
of Churches

lutheranworld.org

Office of the General Secretary

Statement on Freedom of Religion or Belief

On 18 June 2013 the LWF Council adopted the following Public Statement

1. From its founding in 1947 to the present day, the Lutheran World Federation has supported the freedom of religion or belief and been concerned about violations of it. The first resolution of the First Assembly of the LWF (Lund 1947) focused on advocacy for “homeless and displaced persons and refugees without regard to their origin, language, nationality, or status.” It included this call to national governments and to the United Nations:

... above all to defend the sacred right of refugees and minorities to conduct their Church affairs in their mother tongue and according to their own Confession.

2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. A Lutheran pastor, Frederick Nolde, represented the World Council of Churches in the deliberations that led to the Universal Declaration. He is credited as being the main drafter of Article 18, which reads as follows:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his (sic.) religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his (sic.) religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

This freedom has been elaborated in two major United Nations documents: Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981).

3. Over the years, LWF Assemblies and Councils have adopted numerous resolutions touching on human rights in general and freedom of religion in particular. These include:

a) Fourth Assembly of the LWF (Helsinki 1963), Statement of Principle on Freedom to Attend Religious Meetings:

The Lutheran World Federation believes that the right given by God to every man (sic.) to exercise religious freedom ought to include the right to attend an international assembly of Christian churches to which his church has designated him as a delegate.

b) Sixth Assembly of the LWF (Dar es Salaam 1977), Statement on Human Rights, contains this paragraph:



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We affirm that it is our task as Christians to promote, together with those who have different beliefs, the realization of full freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and we emphasize the right to practice the community of faith across national borders. We explicitly declare that freedom of conscience includes the right not to adhere to any religion.

c) Seventh Assembly of the LWF (Budapest 1984), Statement on Human Rights. The first observation in that broad statement was the following:

In recent years, the world community has been especially concerned about ... The denial of religious freedom, be it in the form of private or public worship, open witness to the faith, the education of the young, or the right to live according to one's conscience ...

d) Eighth Assembly of the LWF (Curitiba, 1990). The Assembly Message contains this paragraph:

This fostering of respect for and tolerance of religious beliefs different from our own is possible only if we are willing to listen and share in the hopes and aspirations of others. This does not mean watering down our own faith but rather, by listening to the faith and convictions of others, we have the opportunity to deepen our own commitments and to define our identity in relation to others and not over against them.

e) Ninth Assembly of the LWF (Hong Kong 1997), Statement on Freedom of Religion. The Assembly called upon member churches (and in the first case, the ecumenical community):

to redouble their efforts and to cooperate widely in promoting and defending religious freedom in their own societies and internationally.

... to focus on religious freedom in the context of their economic, social, cultural, civil and political human rights:

- through prayers and intercessions, Bible studies and worship;
- through educational materials, seminars and public manifestations;
- by participating in programs of cooperation with people of other faiths; and
- by interceding with state authorities and religious authorities wherever necessary in defence of individuals or groups whose rightful religious freedoms are being curtailed or denied.

f) LWF Council (Turku 2000) received a report on "The Involvement of LWF Member Churches in Promoting and Defending Religious Freedom." This report concluded in part:

Religious intolerance has been a source of untold violence and immeasurable human suffering over the ages, up to this very day. It is, in one form or another, a feature of the day-to-day experience of many member churches of the LWF. The right to religious freedom, on the other hand, provides a source and basis for peaceful co-existence. It



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also mirrors a respect for the dignity of every human person, which the churches are committed to promote.

g) Tenth Assembly of the LWF (Winnipeg 2003), the Assembly Message stated in regard to The Mission of the Church in Multifaith Contexts:

With the world mission conferences in San Antonio (USA) and Salvador (Brazil), we affirm that “we cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God.” In light of this, we must continue to ... affirm religious freedom ...

4. Since 1986, the United Nations has had a Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. (This mandate was at first entitled, “on the Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.”) The Special Rapporteur makes thoughtful and very helpful reports to the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly. These reports address current critical issues relating to freedom of religion. The Special Rapporteur also makes country visits and communicates to the relevant countries urgent concerns relating to the violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

5. Current scholarship as well as the reports of the Special Rapporteur, finds that “to the extent that governments deny religious freedoms, violent religious persecution and conflict will increase.” And, “when social and government restrictions on religion are reduced, violent religious persecution is reduced.” Evidence of these assertions is found in many places in the world today. For example, in Indonesia, the government fails to enforce national laws which guarantee freedom of religion with the result that church buildings have been forcibly closed or even destroyed (including from the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan / Batak Christian Protestant Church) following the demands of extremist Muslim groups. In Iran and Syria we hear reports of the imprisonment and abuse of Christian clergy. In Pakistan the laws of blasphemy are used by some to take revenge on their enemies or to exploit weak persons and communities. In Tanzania we note with concern the burning of several houses of worship in the aftermath of violent riots, including one church building of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. In Nigeria, we grieve the many deaths caused by continuing violence that is clothed in religion, especially attacks on churches and other houses of worship.

6. The LWF Council:

6.1 Reaffirms the strong support of The Lutheran World Federation for the universal right of all persons to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

6.2 Calls upon member churches and the ecumenical community to redouble their efforts and to cooperate widely in promoting and defending religious freedom in their own societies and internationally, including the freedom of public and private worship in the form and language of their choice.



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6.3 Calls upon the LWF and its member churches to intercede with state authorities and religious authorities wherever necessary in defence of individuals or groups whose rightful religious freedoms are being curtailed or denied, including the right to change religions and the right to wear or display religious symbols.

6.4 Pledges the cooperation and support of the LWF for the United Nations mechanisms that promote and protect religious freedom, and in particular the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

6.5 Calls upon Lutherans and other people of faith around the world to pray for all people who suffer because of the lack of freedom of religion or belief.

18 June 2013
Geneva, Switzerland