



The World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism and the Support by the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau

Dr Agnes Abuom, moderator of the WCC Central Committee

Peace and grace of our Lord Jesus to you brothers and sisters! Receive greetings from the World Council team of staff and its leadership.

First, I would like to thank you for this invitation to speak to your synod meeting on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the decision of the synod of the Evangelical Church in Hesse and Nassau in October 1970 to support the Special Fund of the Programme to Combat Racism which became popularly known as (PCR) of the World Council of Churches with an amount of 100.000 German Marks from the church tax contribution to the church.

Your church became the first regional Protestant church in West Germany to offer financial support to the Special Fund of the PCR, and this at a time when the programme was facing heavy criticism from church leaders in the Federal Republic of Germany. This was a real sign of “ökumenische Verbundenheit” and “Solidarität” not only with the global ecumenical movement but especially with those oppressed by racist policies and actions, and we remember your decision with gratitude and appreciation.

From its very beginnings, the issue of racism has been on the agenda of the 20th century ecumenical movement. The South African election that brought the National Party to power in 1948 and with it the formal policy of “**apartheid**”, took place just three months before the founding of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in August 1948. So the WCC was confronted by the malicious and insidious policy of apartheid from its very beginnings, and the Amsterdam assembly denounced “prejudice based upon race or colour and from practices of discrimination and segregation as denials of justice and human dignity.”¹

Yet the decision to create the Programme to Combat Racism and its Special Fund marked a new dimension in the struggle. It was no longer enough to make statements regretting or even denouncing racism. As the first director of the Programme, Baldwin Sjollema, has written, the Programme to Combat Racism

¹ Barney Pityana and Maralia Schüller, “Racism,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd ed., ed. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 953.

“was the result of a new awareness of the need to change racist structures and work for a redistribution of power.”²

The impetus for the Programme to Combat Racism came from the Uppsala assembly of the WCC in 1968, impelled by the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968, three months before he was due to give the opening sermon at the assembly. This placed the issue of racism on the agenda of the assembly with a new urgency. The Black US writer James Baldwin was invited to speak to delegates (much in his address is still relevant today), and the assembly called for the establishment by the WCC of a “coordinated secretariat on the elimination of racism.”³

The meeting of the central committee in Canterbury the following year (1969) had before it a proposal to create an “ecumenical programme to combat racism,” initially intended, as a five-year programme. Re-reading the proposal more than 50 years later, it is shocking how much of it still speaks to the current world situation, “time is running out,” the proposal stated then.⁴

It confessed that “churches have participated in racial discrimination” and that “many religious institutions of the white northern world have benefitted from racially exploitative economic systems.”

The proposal went on to call upon churches “to move beyond charity, grants and traditional programming to relevant and sacrificial action among all,” and to “become agents for the radical restructuring of society.” There can be no justice in our world, it stated, “without a transfer of economic resources to undergird the redistribution of political power and to make cultural self-determination meaningful.”

Churches, it said, that have “benefitted from racially exploitative economic systems should immediately allocate a significant proportion of their total resources, without exercising paternalistic mechanisms of control, to organizations of the racially oppressed or organizations supporting victims of racial injustice.”

² Baldwin Sjollem, *Never Bow to Racism* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2015), 184.

³ Norman Goodall, ed., *The Uppsala Report 1968. Official report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), 242, WCC Digital Archive: <https://archive.org/details/wcca14/page/242/mode/2u>.

⁴ See the “Plan for an Ecumenical Programme to Combat Racism,” Appendix XX, and the attached proposal to transfer funds from the WCC reserves to the Special Fund, Appendix XXI, in the *Minutes and Reports of the Twenty-Third Meeting*, Central Committee, World Council of Churches, August 12th-22nd, 1969, 270-279, WCC Digital Archive: <https://archive.org/details/twentythirdmeeti00unse/page/270/mode/2up>.

Most crucially for the future programme of the World Council of Churches, it stated: “In this transfer of resources a corporate act by the ecumenical fellowship of churches can provide a significant moral lead.”

For the World Council itself, this meant that alongside study programmes, consultations, and political action, a Special Fund was created to support organizations of oppressed racial groups or organizations supporting victims of racial injustice. The central committee decided – not without debate – that an initial US\$200,000 for the fund should come from the reserves of the WCC and that an appeal be sent to member churches for an additional US\$300,000, while the WCC executive committee was authorized to decide on the organizations to which the Special Fund be distributed.

The first grants from the Special Fund were decided upon at a meeting of the WCC executive committee in September 1970, at its meeting which happened to take place here in West Germany, at the Protestant Academy of your church of Hesse and Nassau at Arnoldshain. The grants included support to liberation movements in South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, and Zimbabwe.

The decision was condemned by the South African government but also led to immediate disagreement between the leadership of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the World Council of Churches. The EKD council chairperson, Bishop Hermann Dietzfelbinger wrote to the WCC general secretary about the “extraordinary concern” of the EKD, and that “by no means a few church members [are] protesting energetically against” the decision.⁵ Two weeks later the EKD council noted that there was disagreement within the EKD about the grants and expressed the hope that the reply from the WCC would clarify the situation.

It was in this context that the synod of the Evangelical Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN) decided by a relatively narrow margin of 90 to 78 votes in October 1970 to give 100,000 German Marks from its budget to the Special Fund. This decision led to the bishops’ conference of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, chaired by Bishop Wölber of Hamburg, to accuse the EKHN of endangering “the unity of action of the EKD.” The decision was also the focus of fierce criticism in the German media not least because of the fact that the liberation movements were engaged in armed struggle against colonial and racist structures, even though

⁵ This follows the detailed analysis of the responses of the churches in the two German states to the Programme to Combat Racism by Roger Williamson in his PhD: *Alternative Strategies? Reactions in the Two Germanies to the World Council of Churches’ Programme to Combat Racism 1969–1975* (PhD Birmingham 1980). It is available for download at: <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.291780>.

the resolution of your synod stated that the funds were to be used for humanitarian purposes.

In this situation,⁶ and facing such criticism, the church of Hesse and Nassau could have decided to play down or even reconsider its decision, not least because some of the synod members had complained that church members in the congregations had been insufficiently informed. Instead, your church adopted a different strategy: not only did you mount an information campaign within your church to explain the decision and why it was necessary, but also about how the Evangelical Church in Hesse and Nassau was part of the worldwide ecumenical movement, and what this meant for the life of your church itself. There was an intensive programme of meetings – no fewer than 80 between the end of October and December 1970 – in the congregations and elsewhere both to explain the decision about the Special Fund and to raise awareness about the World Council of Churches, and the place of your church within it. The decision to support the Special Fund became a catalyst “that all levels of the church, from the church leadership of the EKD to the individual church member were dealing with the ecumenical movement. Even church members, whose membership was expressed mainly through regular payment of church tax, became involved to an extent never before seen with the global context of Christianity.”⁷ The researcher Sebastian Tripp, in his study of the decision of the church in Hesse and Nassau, came to the conclusion that:

The decision of the WCC to support anti-colonial liberation movements and anti-apartheid groups in southern Africa with the Special Fund of the Programme to Combat Racism, as well as the decision of the church synod of the EKHN to provide this special fund with DM 100,000 from its regular budget, marked a turning point in the relationship between the local and global church. For the first time, a decision by the WCC was so far-reaching that it had a direct impact on the ground. The “globalization” of the church reached the local level.⁸

Against this background of controversy five decades ago, the fact that in 2022, the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches is to be held in Germany, in Karlsruhe, shows how far we have travelled together in the past 50 years.

⁶ This section follows Sebastian Tripp, “Das Programm zur Bekämpfung des Rassismus und die ‘Glokalisierung’ der Kirchen,” in *Globalisierung der Kirchen: Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der Dritten Welt in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren*, ed. Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 297–312.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 307

⁸ *Ibid.*, 308

Of course, there is much more that could be said about the Programme to Combat Racism. Later the controversy included also the appeal to boycott banks that were engaged in loans to South Africa. The programme and its special fund were, as the assessment of the first five years put it, “A Small Beginning.”⁹ Yet between 1970 and 1990 some US\$9.2 million were granted by the Special Fund to organizations in different parts of the world, focusing mainly on Southern Africa, but also including grants, for example, to Indigenous people such as Aborigines in Australia, Maoris in New Zealand, the Inuit in Canada, Native Americans in the United States, to many indigenous peasant groups on Latin America, as well as to other organizations.¹⁰

I mentioned earlier how the apartheid government of South Africa came to power shortly before the first assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948. Four decades later, shortly after his release from prison, Nelson Mandela visited the WCC in Geneva in 1990. In 1994 the World Council was able to hold its central committee in Johannesburg, shortly before the first democratic elections in South Africa, and in 1998 Nelson Mandela addressed the 8th Assembly of the WCC in Harare, on the WCC’s 50th anniversary:

When . . . you initiated the Programme to Combat Racism and the Special Fund to support liberation movements, you showed that yours was not merely the charitable support of distant benefactors, but a joint struggle for shared aspirations,” he said. “Above all, you respected the judgment of the oppressed as to what were the most appropriate means for attaining their freedom. For that true solidarity, the people of South and Southern Africa will always remember the WCC with gratitude.”¹¹

The end of apartheid, however, did not mean the end of racism. I have mentioned already just how much that was in the proposal in 1969 to create the Programme to Combat Racism is still – shockingly – relevant today. This is something which we have become aware of yet again in our Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace that began at our assembly in Busan in 2013, and where the issue of racism has been a focus. Xenophobia, racism and populist nationalism gain momentum every day, as we have been reminded by the Black Lives Matter movement, and like a bushfire, they are becoming widespread. Xenophobia has caused division, claimed lives,

⁹ Elisabeth Adler, *A Small beginning: An Assessment of the first five years of the Programme to Combat Racism* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974).

¹⁰ Sjollema, *Never Bow to Racism*, 76, 121,

¹¹ “Address by President Nelson Mandela,” in *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eight Assembly of the World Council Of Churches*, ed. Diane Kessler (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 228, WCC Digital Archive: <https://archive.org/details/wcca25/page/228/mode/2up>.

and is a threat to peace and security in many spaces. The WCC executive committee has decided this year that overcoming racism should be a major priority for the World Council as we look toward the 2022 assembly in Karlsruhe and beyond. In this we can all be inspired by the action of the synod of the Evangelical Church in Hesse and Nassau 50 years ago.

Therefore, as we journey together to Karlsruhe, and as we celebrate the milestones of 50 years decision that was indeed a great leap in the ecumenical movement; the 11th assembly begs us as pilgrims to look back, see the present and envision the future and ask the following:

What do we need to do today in order to overcome resurgence of racism, xenophobia to restore broken economies; to heal and reconcile broken lives, and relationships? What type of mechanisms and structure does the church and ecumenical movement at large require reconciling hurting and fractured communities due to partisanis, prejudices, broken governments, tribalism and religious violent extremism. Together as pilgrims of justice and peace we will overcome the resistance and powers of death as we affirm the power of love and life in Jesus Christ.

As an encouragement, and reminder, it is important to reiterate that our struggle against racism is both physical and spiritual thus needing tools and resources from both realms.

Let me now finish by quoting the conclusion of the proposal that went to the WCC central committee in 1969 to create an ecumenical programme to combat racism: Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. It is against the principalities, against the powers of evil, against the deeply entrenched demonic forces of racial prejudice and hatred that we must battle. Ours is a task of exorcism. The demons operate throughout social, economic and political structures. But the root of the problem is as deep as human sin, and only God's love and our dedicated response can eradicate it.

Once more thank you for inviting me and WCC to share our story/stories at your synod.