****

**Ecumenical Strategic Forum**

**Welcoming Remarks from the General Secretary**

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit

8 May 2019, Bossey, Switzerland

I welcome you to this ecumenical strategic forum on racism, xenophobia, and racial discrimination, and I thank each and all of you for dedicating your time, your expertise, your commitment to serious consideration of the issue of racism and racial justice and to the strategic role that the churches, partner agencies, and people of good will might take to address them.

We have a document on “racism” in our files, showing the history of this theme in our ecumenical movement. The *National Geographic* magazine published last year a long and quite informative article about race and racism. Race “a construction in terms of scientific approach”. There are no substantial genetic differences between people, for example of different colour of skin. The idea that humanity is divided into significantly different races has no evidence. But “racism” as ideology and global, political and economic realities is a brutal reality. We have important observations made by N.G: Civil society organizations and religious fellowships can make a real difference.

Of course, racism in an ongoing concern of the fellowship of churches, indeed of the whole ecumenical movement. In fact, it long antedates the founding of the WCC itself. A signal moment, perhaps, was the 1933 statement, crafted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of the World Alliance, meeting in Sofia, decrying racial discrimination, “whether because of color or any other grounds,” especially against the Jews in Germany. So began the ecumenical support for the Confessing Church against the racist ideology of the Nazis.

Later and better known was the resolve shown in Uppsala, following the address by American novelist James Baldwin to the WCC’s 4th Assembly, to combat racism worldwide, which led to a 20-year engagement in Southern Africa. Chronicled so well by Baldwin Sjollema’s *Never Bow to Racism—*we will hear from him shortly—the Programme to Combat Racism illustrates the potential of ecumenical engagement, as well as the boldness, the persistence, and, yes, the inevitable controversy required to make serious social change at a global level.

Today, nearly 30 years after the collapse of Apartheid, we see a new phase and face of racism in recently emboldened racist movements: white supremacy in the US, Hindu nationalism in India, anti-Semitism in Europe and North America, joining generations of oppression of the Roma in Europe and centuries of ill-treatment of native and Indigenous peoples around the globe.

In the most extreme instances we find actual denial of the very humanity of the oppressed minorities, rendering them without legal rights or recourse.

Without extending this sad recitation of particulars, we must also note that racism is often allied with populist rhetoric and demagoguery, anti-immigrant fears, religious exclusivism, or xenophobic resentments fuelled by mythic grievances. So often racist behaviour stems from inherited hatred reinforced by self-interest and group identification. Invariably it results in diminished prospects for its victims and even in generations of discrimination, gender violence, and poverty; and so race is a constant factor in all the other work you do.

For example, racism is a very prominent feature of the situation in West Papua observed by the Pilgrim Team Visit organized by the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs in February this year, and racism and related issues (including caste-based discrimination) are expected to emerge from the observations of other visits this year as well, examples of these are the treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar and the Dalit situation in India.

All this makes racism notoriously intractable. A century after a civil war was fought over slavery in the US, for example, and 50 years after hard-fought legislative victories in the areas of civil rights and voting rights, we find millions of African Americans still suffering diminished prospects by virtue of their race, facing jeopardy from police mistreatment, and confronting a resurgent white supremacy movement.

An affront to the God of life, racist ideology and discriminatory practice generate a culture of death.

Of course, the churches themselves are not without blame. Not only through their historic participation in the colonizing efforts of the modern period and their support of slavery, often citing biblical warrants, but also through their justifications of racial inferiority through theological grounding, they sometimes paved the way for systematic oppression through racial laws and policies. Apartheid, we recall, was fundamentally a religious heresy.

Yet racism is more than a historical lesson or an anthropological puzzle. It is a persistent, daily, ugly, death-dealing streak in societies on every continent, one that robs the future prospects of tens of millions of people. Where lies our present accountability here? This is what you—what we—are here to consider.

In the last several years, through collaboration with you, our ecumenical partners and member churches, and as a special focus of our Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, we have dedicated considerable resources to understanding and responding to racism in regions around the world, from North America to India, from Eastern Europe to Latin America. This more intense, recent focus on race grew out of the 2016 Solidarity Visit to the US, organized after race-related events in Charleston and Ferguson and elsewhere shocked us all.

We have also joined forces with the United Nations agencies and their efforts, including those of the Human Rights Council and the International Decade for Peoples of African Descent, to understand and highlight particular cases. Through Pilgrim Team Visits, we have offered solidarity and accompaniment to those individuals, churches, and communities victimized by racial injustice and its effects. And we have lent support to regional initiatives, such as the National Council of Churches in the USA’s “ACT Now to End Racism” and the newly revived Poor People’s Campaign.

The Rome Conference on Xenophobia, Racism, and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration (September 2018) is one of the many initiatives resulting from the ecumenical endeavour to challenge racism. This was organized in close collaboration with the Vatican’s Discastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. After the success of this event, we are making plans with the Dicastery for a new world Ccnference on “Identities under Threat: [Tackling] Discrimination against National, Ethnic, Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Minorities” in Geneva, 13-14 November 2019.

At this juncture, we must ask: How does one get at the multiple levels and layers of systemic racism? What more can we do, as churches and agencies, strategically and programmatically, together? Where can we best focus, how might we make a distinctive, decisive, transformative difference in combating racism today? How do we steer the human heart toward reconciliation?

The theme of the Assembly will help us address racism. One of the features of Christ’s love is that it does not accept the boundaries of race and ethnicity. In Christ there is another vision for our one humanity, nurtured in the examples of Jesus praxis and of the theology of Christ’s love to the whole world.

In our ecumenical journey of faith from Busan toward Karlsruhe, I hope that, with your partnership and collaboration, in these days we can devise and divine some answers to these questions and find ways to live our faith, instil hope in those affected by racism, and embolden further action and advocacy for racial justice and reconciliation.

Thank you.