

THE CHURCH OF NORWAY AND HUMAN RIGHTS – CHURCH OF NORWAY GENERAL SYNOD RESOLUTION (2014)

1. God has created all human beings in the image of God, and the inherent, equal dignity of all human beings is the basis for the radical message of equality found in Christianity. The foundations of the church's efforts for universal human rights are therefore faith in God, the Creator. Faith in Jesus Christ, who shows God's care for all sides of human life and the church's calling and mission, also inspires the church's human rights involvement, encouraging a confrontation with oppression, inequality and injustice. The inherent dignity of a person can never be taken away from a person, even though his or her human rights might not be fulfilled. Human rights protect human beings from birth. The Christian understanding of a person and ethics extends beyond this, striving to protect human beings from conception until the life's end.

Universal human rights protect human beings against abuse and oppression. In light of Christian faith, human rights are expressions of the inviolability and equality of human beings.

2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN human rights system reflect an international agreement on common norms irrespective of religion, life stance or political ideology. Religions and life stances have different theological interpretations of, or justifications for, human rights, but can still agree on these rights. Human rights are well suited for dialogue and collaboration across beliefs and ideology.

3. Human rights are a tool in the struggle for human dignity, freedom and justice. When states have made a commitment to

uphold human rights, those rights have strong and unique legitimacy. The human rights system also has procedures through which states can be held accountable when rights are violated.

4. Human rights have a legal and a moral side:

» Human rights obligations are first and foremost held by states. Each individual state has the responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the various human rights conventions.

» Human rights also involve the efforts of individual Christians and the church. The church's role as a moral duty-bearer has various dimensions:

» Respecting human rights: The church shall not violate human rights. If other churches or church actors breach human rights, the Church of Norway has a responsibility to address this.

» Protect and fulfil human rights: The church shall hold the state (the legal duty-bearer) responsible to protect and fulfil human rights. Advocacy and criticism of power are relevant methods. The church is also called to strengthen the ability of rights holders to fight for their own rights.

5. The Church Synod recommends that the document "*Set the oppressed free! The Church of Norway's involvement for human rights*" be discussed and thus lead to reflection and action in the Church of Norway.

6. The Church Synod asks the central church councils and congregations to let

the respect for human rights be an integral part of church work, including:

» to further develop the human rights approach to diakonia on the basis of the Church of Norway *Plan for diakonia*. It is particularly important that the diaconal work done locally and by the specialized agencies serves in accompaniment of people in their encounters with local authorities, to ensure that human rights are fulfilled.

» to continue working on including a human rights perspective in Christian education and worship.

» to consider how the Synod's resolution and the document *Set the oppressed free!* can be used to strengthen the congregations' involvement for human rights, and further develop resources in this field. The Church Synod encourages congregations to use their local knowledge, channels and capacities, to help provide fellow human beings with an experience of being heard, seen and respected.

» all believers are encouraged to work for human rights.

7. Prioritising

The Church Synod recommends the following criteria for use in prioritising the Church of Norway's efforts for human rights nationally and internationally. The criteria are not listed in any specific order:

a) When Christian faith is used to legitimise violations of human rights, or where the church itself is responsible for violations

In situations where those who are violating human rights do so with reference to Christian faith, Christian churches have a special responsibility to criticise this and to struggle for human rights. Breaches of human rights that happen in a church context or where the church or church representatives are the perpetrators are also particularly severe, and the effect might be that the church setting gives the violations a veil of legitimacy. Such cases should have high priority for the Church of Norway. This of course applies all the more if our own church is responsible (or in part responsible) for rights violations. Areas where the Church of Norway has a history of

complicity in rights violations, are areas the church should pay extra attention to.

b) Requests and concerns from ecumenical organisations where the Church of Norway is a member, and requests and concerns from other churches and organisations

As a member of international, ecumenical organisations, the Church of Norway has a strong institutional and moral obligation to follow up concerns that are shared with us by other churches through these organisations. The Church of Norway also has the possibility, through its membership in ecumenical organisations, to work together with others in a global, ecumenical fellowship, with potential synergies and combined impact. In addition, concerns shared by churches and sister and brothers in Christ from other parts of the world are often brought to our attention, though these are deliberated upon case by case.

c) Violations of indigenous peoples' rights

The Church of Norway has a special responsibility to direct the spotlight on indigenous peoples' rights in general and the Sami people's rights in particular. Almost all indigenous peoples in the world have been subject to human rights violations, often inflicted by the state and the majority population in the community. The Church of Norway has in recent years apologised for its previous attitude to and actions against the Sami people. The reconciliation process that has begun must find its continuation in a strong commitment to indigenous peoples' rights, nationally and internationally, by contributing to ending any violation of the rights of indigenous peoples.

d) Cases that are forgotten by others and are not on the agenda locally, nationally and internationally

Some situations are left in the shadows, away from the spotlight of the media and the political agenda, although they might be situations of severe and widespread human rights violations. This might in itself be a reason for the church to become involved in the issue. Jesus' example encourages Christians and the church to take care of the most marginalised. This criterion also implies an obligation to stay well informed about the human rights situation worldwide.

e) Freedom of religion

As a faith community, the church has a special responsibility to secure all peoples' right to believe, to not believe, or to change belief. The freedom of religion or belief is under pressure. As a church we have a special responsibility to defend the freedom of religion or belief nationally and internationally. The church should pay special attention to areas where religious minorities are subject to grave human rights breaches. This work finds strength in ecumenical collaboration and interreligious dialogue.

f) Especially widespread, severe and complex violations of human rights

Many places in the world, people are subject to violations of a number of human rights at the same time, making their situation especially severe. In such situations, there is also typically little chance to fight for one's own rights. Slavery or slavery-like conditions can serve as examples. In such situations, it is particularly pertinent that the church speaks on behalf of people and supports people's capacity to fight for their rights.

g) Cases where the Norwegian state or other Norwegian actors are responsible for violations of human rights

If Norwegian authorities or other Norwegian actors are seen to be responsible or in part responsible for breaches of human rights, whether in Norway or somewhere else in the world, every Norwegian citizen and the church as part of Norwegian civil society have the responsibility to advocate for the respect of people's rights. One reason for this is ethical: Norwegian authorities act on behalf of the population, and as part of a democratic society we have both the possibility and the responsibility to influence what our authorities do on behalf of the country. Another reason is pragmatic: It is often easier for the Church of Norway to influence the behaviour of Norwegian authorities than that of other countries. Likewise, when other Norwegian actors are complicit in human rights violations, the churches in Norway have a special responsibility and possibility to advocate for change.

h) Geographical and thematic range in the overall involvement

A comprehensive and credible human rights

work in the Church of Norway should over time include a certain range of cases, with diversity in thematic content and countries involved.

i) Possible impact

If our involvement for human rights is not just a theoretical exercise, but has an agenda of change, then one of the questions we have to ask is where and how we as church actors have the best opportunities to make an impact. This question becomes a central criterion for where we should focus our efforts. How best to determine our potential impact will vary with time and context, but relevant factors might include:

- » Closeness to decision makers (like e.g. Norwegian authorities, as mentioned further up)
- » Relation to any of the persons or groups affected, knowledge of the thematic area, or good church or other networks
- » Momentum in a case: Attention to or political interest in an issue can expand the room for advocacy
- » Cases where religious know-how and a religious vocabulary are especially important assets