

THE DEN DOLDER RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROTECT THE STATELESS AND END STATELESSNESS

Message from the international ecumenical consultation *Churches Advocating for Stateless Persons* 12 – 14 September 2014

*I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
I was naked and you clothed me,
I was sick and you visited me,
I was in prison and you came to me.
(Matt.25:35-36)*

As Christians, we believe that all people have been created in the image of God. We believe that we are all equal as children of God. Each human being has inherent dignity and worth.

These beliefs are entirely consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first words of which proclaim that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”.

The role of government is to promote the recognition of our inherent dignity and the achievement of these rights. Nations, nationality and citizenship are human constructs. They should always promote human rights, not detract from them. The existence of statelessness represents both a failure of government and a violation of God’s will.

Building on the momentum of the World Council of Churches (WCC) 10th Assembly in Busan, Korea, in 2013, the WCC and Kerk in Actie convened a consultation on 12-14 September 2014 in Den Dolder, Netherlands, prior to the Global Forum on Statelessness (15 – 17 September 2014 in The Hague). Participants from different parts of the world came together to contribute towards the churches’ response to protect the stateless and end statelessness.

Statelessness and human rights

In theory, everyone enjoys human rights, regardless of her or his nationality. In reality, nationality is often the vehicle for the expression of other human rights, which is why the right to a nationality (article 15 UDHR) is fundamental. Statelessness ensues when the right to a nationality is not protected. The international community has underlined how important is the right to a nationality by adopting the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. It is a common responsibility to prevent and end stateless and to protect stateless people. Stateless people face discrimination in all areas of life, including accessing education, decent shelter, healthcare and work, founding a family and travelling.

Stateless people are among the most vulnerable in the world and are exposed to degradation and inhumanity, in the form of human trafficking, exploitation, forced migration, arbitrary detention and deportation, as well as being compelled to live on the margins of society. Churches have assumed a responsibility to help ensure that the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings are not compromised by human institutions such as citizenship and nationality.

Theological basis for our ecumenical engagement

The church’s engagement with human rights has a long theological tradition. The underlying theological assumption of active concern for those who are suffering is the belief that all people created by God constitute an inextricable unity. Solidarity and compassion are virtues that all Christians are called to practice, regardless

of their possessions, as signs of their Christian discipleship. Compassion and care for one another and acknowledging the image of God in all humanity is at the core of our Christian identity and an expression of Christian discipleship. Humanitarian conduct is an essential part of the Gospel. We are instructed in Micah 6:8 to “do justice.” And the commandment of love, the greatest commandment of our Lord Jesus Christ, is to love God and to love one another.

These biblical and theological bases motivate us as churches and Christian bodies to express our Christian commitment and to be engaged in our prophetic witness to speak for the rights of those who are voiceless and marginalized as stateless people. The Christian family, therefore, ought to take up the plight of stateless persons as this struggle reflects our cardinal universal principles and values: that a human being has the right to life, liberty and security; the right to education, equal protection under the law, and to be free from slavery and torture; the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and to freedom of opinion and expression; and the right to a nationality. Being unrecognized by any nation, stateless persons are particularly vulnerable to additional violations of their human rights.

Possible forms of action

Having heard experiences of statelessness in different context and recognizing that stateless people are part of our churches and of our communities, we recommend to our constituencies and networks the following forms of action through collaboration with member churches, church related and other faith-based organisations, stateless people, civil society, international organisations and other stakeholders.

Pastors and church members should continue to reach out to and protect stateless people, providing them care and support, challenging the discrimination they face and thereby increasing the ability of the churches to respond to their needs and to help them become full and equal members of the community.

Churches should engage in regional and national education on the theology and practice of addressing statelessness as a part of human rights for the purpose of building awareness in the churches on statelessness as well as the skills (such as legal and analysis) necessary to directly assist specific communities and individuals and advocate with them on their behalf.

Global advocacy which highlights specific local and regional realities of statelessness is central to raise the voice of the legally “invisible” at the grassroots, national, regional, and international levels. In this regard, we encourage churches to advocate for universal ratification of the UN Statelessness Conventions and relevant human rights treaties, and support the UN High Commissioner for Refugees’ Campaign to End Statelessness by 2024.

Among the measures churches and church-related groups can take to end statelessness include raising up the particular concern for the statelessness of children. Children inherit a situation for which they are not responsible. Therefore churches and other actors, including states, should agree to break this vicious cycle by putting an end to the statelessness of children by 2019, the midpoint of the UN decade. As part of this effort, we urge that churches advocate for universal birth registration, consider the launch of an ecumenical effort along the lines of “No Child Should Be Stateless!”, and call for an end to gender discrimination in nationality laws.

Last but not least, we affirm the role of churches to creatively use their opportunities for registering important life events—such as birth, baptism, confirmation, marriage, and death—in ways that help people to secure documents that help reduce statelessness.

The participants of the consultation hope that these recommendations will be shared widely by ecumenical organisations and confessional bodies and that they will contribute to ending statelessness.