

**CEC/LWF Human Rights Training Workshop**  
***Human rights and religious freedom***  
**3-7 March 2004**  
**Bratislava, Slovakia**

**Report**

Between 3 and 7 March 2004, representatives of Protestant and Orthodox churches from 15 countries in Central and Eastern Europe took part in a CEC/LWF Human Rights Training Workshop on 'Human rights and religious freedom', in Bratislava, Slovakia.

At the beginning of the workshop, participants gave brief reports on their perspectives and experiences in relation to human rights and religious freedom. Some of the issues raised in these reports included:

- Human trafficking related to sexual and commercial exploitation
- Children's rights, and protection of the unborn
- Social security, and equal labour rights for women and men
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Euthanasia, genetic engineering, and other issues of bioethics
- Need for international assessment of totalitarian communist regimes and the role played by different states and parties in promoting and sustaining the Soviet totalitarian regime
- Rights of marginalised people
- Youth rights and access to education
- Religious, ethnic and national minorities
- Self image of communities, and issues of xenophobic literature and journalism
- Right to work and to fair and reasonable conditions of work; equitable economy
- Human dignity
- Right of access to proper health assistance
- Religious freedom in relationship with state institutions; minority-majority relationships between religious communities
- Free expression of opinions
- Access to accurate information and access to media
- Individual and community rights to restoration of properties, especially in Central and Eastern Europe
- Right to religious identity

The focus of this workshop - on 'Human rights and religious freedom' - was introduced in a keynote presentation by Rev. Rüdiger Noll, Director of the Church and Society Commission of the CEC. He underlined the important role of the churches in relation to human rights and made it clear that the Christian concept of human dignity was a foundation for developing human rights values and principles. After emphasising the attributes of human rights, the speaker underlined some dualities in perceptions of human rights. He then presented the specificity of the EU Constitution/Charter of Fundamental Rights regarding religious freedom, with particular accent on Art. II-10 and Art. I-51.

Rev. Noll posed the three following questions as work for the groups. The answers of the groups are listed as dot-points after each question.

I.

A. Are there different perceptions of human rights in Eastern and Western Europe?

- Though human rights are *de jure* the same between East and West, there is a difference in practice.
- There is a difference of approach: collective/community vs. individual
- Differences persist in perception and level of implementation.
- Levels of awareness of human rights vary between East and West; human rights have a credibility problem in the East.
- Access to and flow of accurate information regarding human rights differs between East and West, as do the social and economic environments.

B. How do we deal with them?

- Providing accurate information
- Improving communication
- Establishing regular dialogue and regional reflection groups

II.

What should be the role of the churches in establishing and implementing human rights?

- Exercising a prophetic voice in making the cause of human rights a common concern in our societies / in the context of protesting abuses of power.
- Re-articulating the issue of human rights in the language of religious values.
- Monitoring human rights violations; advocating for human rights.
- Establishing a think-tank of church experts for enabling churches to better understand and communicate issues of human rights.
- Providing human rights education within different levels of church structures.

III

A. What should be the relation between majority and minority churches in relation to religious freedom?

- Dialogue and cooperation in ecumenical spirit.
- Improvement in communication and openness.
- Sharing of resources and know-how.

B. What are the issues?

- Registration of religious constituencies.
- Property issues.
- Reluctance of some conservative societies to 'outside' values.

The workshop continued with a presentation by Anthony Cardon de Lichtbuer, Human Rights Officer at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. He presented the mechanisms and procedures of work within the UN and some specific tools available at different levels to organisations dealing with human rights.

Ms. Zuzana Fialova, an independent expert on HR, introduced the European regional mechanisms, procedures and tools for the promotion and protection of human rights, with special emphasis on the role of OSCE and the Council of Europe.

The participants also visited the premises of the Slovak Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, and discussed their programmes and methods of work with one of the programme officers.

After discussions within three working groups, the following recommendations were made, for CEC, the LWF, the represented churches, and for the participants themselves:

- Strengthen the network of church people involved in human rights and create space for communication of experiences, giving priority to registration processes for religious groups.
- Support the establishment of reflection groups at regional, local and national level, to address issues within the field of human rights and religious freedom defined by the members of those groups.
- Use ecumenical instruments and mechanisms to resolve ecumenical problems, rather than resorting to governmental or legal mechanisms.
- Create space for human rights education in theological schools, church structures and church media.
- Facilitate exchange of information about registration processes for religious groups, and about violations of religious freedom.
- Organise ecumenical prayer days for victims and take positions in order to inform church constituencies and to raise awareness in society.
- Promote solidarity of majority and minority religious communities through ecumenical contacts, and assistance by majority communities to minority communities to help them secure equal rights.
- Monitor how governments implement human rights, especially with regard to freedom of religion or belief.
- Express church position on bioethical problems, including the rights of the unborn.
- Co-operate on establishing an international committee (under the auspices of CEC and LWF) to assess the totalitarian Communist regime in view of promoting reconciliation, healing of memories and forgiveness.
- Encourage youth voluntary work in the field of human rights.

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