

Anti-Racism and the Fight against Discrimination Today

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Abstract

This article explores the efforts of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in combating racism and discrimination, emphasizing the importance of anti-racism rather than non-racism. The article underlines the intersection of racism with climate change and economic inequality, including its compounded impact on marginalized groups. It highlights an epistemology that gave primacy to Western knowledge and ways of knowing and that became a fundamental tool in making enslavement and colonization acceptable to enslaving and colonizing empires. The article outlines the WCC's commitment to anti-racism – which includes awareness campaigns, capacity building, and global advocacy against systemic racism – and underlines the WCC's role in fostering justice and reconciliation within diverse communities.

Keywords

World Council of Churches, anti-racism, discrimination, justice, advocacy

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Thank you for the invitation to make a presentation on the theme “The role of anti-racism and the fight against discrimination in the work of the World Council of Churches.”¹ The fact that you have requested an address about anti-racism speaks volumes about your desire to talk about what matters in the world today. In South Africa, we have something called “Courageous Conversations,” where people engage in conversations that are uncomfortable and challenging for them but which are necessary for justice, peace, reconciliation, unity, forgiveness, and healing. These courageous conversations shape, form, and build new relationships and a better country and world for all people and creation.

As a global fellowship of 352 member churches in 120 countries and more than 600 million Christians with a variety of cultures, languages, races, and backgrounds, the World Council of Churches (WCC) is a fellowship of the diversity and unity that is a microcosm of our planet – a planet beautified by its diversities and the harmony that comes out of that diversity. Taken positively, diversity is a beautiful thing because it emerges out of the work of our creator God. The trinitarian concept tells us that community and diversity are embedded in the very nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – diverse, yet held together as the one God.

However, history teaches us that diversity has so often been such a terrifying reality for human beings across generations that it became an obsession of societies, which sought to institutionalize uniformity at the expense of diversity and to reduce the body to a cell. In the fight against diversity, people came to see discrimination as an acceptable outcome in society and, at some point, in the church as well. I come from South Africa; many of you are acquainted with the history of my country and its legitimized policy of apartheid. Apartheid was a systemized policy of governance based on racialization and skin colour. This system classified people as white and non-white and gave massive economic, social, political, and (even) religious privileges to whites at the expense of the majority Black South Africans. Though the apartheid policy is no longer part of the country’s laws, it continues to live in people’s minds, hearts, and behaviour.

Today, we will share the work we are doing at the WCC secretariat in our quest to overcome racism, xenophobia, and discrimination. Racism is still alive in the world. Many racial conflicts continue to pervade the world. While our current transversal programme on overcoming racism started only in 2021, the WCC’s commitment to overcome racism dates back to its very foundation and formation. The WCC’s assemblies from 1948 onward have been consistent in their recognition of the impossibility of reconciling

¹ This is an edited version of an address given by Jerry Pillay on 15 May 2024 at an ecumenical conference in Neudietendorf, near Erfurt, Germany, organized by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD).

racism and the Christian faith. And the WCC's 5th Assembly in Nairobi in 1975 was a watershed moment when it unequivocally confessed and proclaimed that "racism is a sin against God."² Racism denies what God created – that is, one human family – and it denies the fair and equal distribution of the *imago Dei* among all human beings, all their diversities notwithstanding.

What follows will outline how the context in which we find ourselves is witnessing increasing instances of discrimination and inequality, the difference between being non-racist and being anti-racist, and our current strategies for being anti-racist churches and why we believe anti-racism is an appropriate response to overcome racism.

Reading the Signs of Our Time

The WCC's 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe in 2022 proclaimed racism as one of the widely identified challenges of our time in its message "A Call to Act Together." The message stated, "We join our voices with the Amsterdam assembly (1948) that 'war is contrary to the will of God,' and the Nairobi assembly (1975) that 'racism is a sin against God.' We lament that we have to repeat these statements."³

Increasing racism due to the climate crisis

Food insecurity, water shortage, forced migration, modern slavery, and anti-migrant and anti-foreigner rhetoric are all increasing in our world because of the effects of the climate crisis. Our work with members of our fellowship has revealed the reality of climate change. In some parts of Africa and elsewhere, droughts now frequently occur in three-year cycles, when they used to occur in cycles of ten years. While some are talking about rising sea levels, our members in the Pacific region and in the Caribbean are talking about sinking homelands, and they have been saying this for decades. While some suffer from frequent droughts, members in Asia, the Caribbean, and the Americas are seeing floods as never seen before, with storms increasing in intensity and destructive force.

Populist political movements

A worrisome development of the past decade has been the steady growth of populist far-right political and social movements, especially in the global North but more generally

² "Structures of Injustice and Struggles for Liberation," in *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975: The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, ed. David M. Paton (London: SPCK, 1976), 109, WCC Digital Archive: <https://archive.org/details/wcca17/page/109>.

³ "Message of the 11th Assembly: A Call to Act Together," in *Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: Report of the WCC 11th Assembly* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2023), 9, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/christs-love-moves-the-world-to-reconciliation-and-unity-report-of-the-wcc-11th-assembly>.

throughout the world. Their common denominator has been their obsession with and outright fabrications targeted at the “migrant,” the “foreigner,” which sometimes means the citizen who does not meet the general stereotype of citizenship. In response to such movements, even well-meaning governments have put in place policies that discriminate against or make it harder for foreigners to find refuge or asylum to protect their political survival, as voters are made to believe that their own economic problems are directly linked to the countries’ migration policies.

The outcome has been an increasing number of racist measures against migrants from the global South. The Pact on Migration and Asylum recently signed by the European Union shows our world is driven more by the desire to exclude than to include.⁴ The British government passed a bill to send asylum seekers to Rwanda.⁵ These measures send the message “We don’t want these people in our country. They are a problem to our own people.” One cannot dismiss concerns that things might get out of control, but we need to treat human beings with care and concern. This is happening at a time when climate, conflict, and economies are forcing many people to migrate not out of choice but out of desperation. The current policies lack a humane touch.

Conflicts that magnify racist and xenophobic behaviour

We face conflicts of varying magnitudes wherever we look. However, different conflicts do not always attract the same attention or response. People often contextually evaluate conflicts, and our world has no single position on them. On the one hand, we abhor conflict and have zero tolerance of it; on the other, we justify, enable, and fuel conflict. More often than not, as Christians, we choose to be indifferent and we outsource our position to politicians: we allow governments to make the decisions or we give uncritical support to government policies and views. Conflicts cause the death of all kinds of people. Usually those who are most vulnerable are the main victims in conflicts, but often news headlines report on victims who are white irrespective of how many they are, unlike the situation when it comes to non-white victims. Conflicts magnify racist and xenophobic prejudices and discrimination in our world today, and sadly the same thing happens in our churches.

Global economic inequalities

One of the most depressing and challenging factors today concerns the global economic landscape. First, our global economic framework is not working for all people. It

⁴ “Migration and Asylum Pact,” Council of the European Union, 15 May 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/eu-migration-asylum-reform-pact>.

⁵ This measure was subsequently rescinded by the new British government elected in July 2024.

is not even a simple question of the global North and global South. In countries such as Germany, the global North and South co-exist. It is not always a question of skin pigmentation but has to do with how the economic outputs of Germany are experienced by all those living in Germany and contributing to that output. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the world's ten richest people doubled their fortunes while the incomes of 99 percent of humanity fell.⁶ Poor countries continue to sink deeper and deeper into debt, using the resources meant for the coming generations to service debts accrued by known despotic self-serving governments that have nothing to show for the debt. The Council for World Mission (CWM), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), the World Methodist Council (WMC), and the WCC have embarked on the #ZacTax campaign, an ecumenical initiative seeking a transformed global tax system. We have been promoting the vision of a New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) to draw global attention to this fundamentally flawed economic system.

The current global economic system has marginalized and created inequalities whose most visible manifestations are racialized. This is seen in the way poor countries, rather than being helped to develop, are instead helped to remain underdeveloped while rich countries continue to pillage their natural resources without adequately recompensing them. Young people, children even, are forced into industries in Africa (such as mining precious metals, cocoa cultivation, or fishing, mostly for the foreign market) and in Asia (such as the garment and footwear industry, also for the markets in the richer countries). They never get to see the final outcomes of their labour; they never get to wear or eat of their labour. They are just another statistic in our world economy, which is not only racist but also classist and gendered. Racialized women and children are the greatest victims of this economic framework. Inequalities are palpable all around us.

An epistemological pandemic

We also need to refer to the epistemological pandemic that continues to give oxygen to racial discrimination in our world. The rise of European imperialism and colonialism was undergirded by an epistemology that gave primacy to Western knowledge and ways of knowing. This epistemology became a fundamental tool in making enslavement and colonization acceptable to enslaving and colonizing empires as well as to the enslaved and colonized societies. Indigenous knowledge systems, knowledge, and ways of knowing were so systematically delegitimized, destroyed, and almost erased that enslaved and colonized peoples lost their sense of self, and their only hope was to become a perfect

⁶ Oxfam International, "Ten richest men double their fortunes in pandemic while incomes of 99 percent of humanity fall," 17 January 2022, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/ten-richest-men-double-their-fortunes-pandemic-while-incomes-99-percent-humanity>.

product of Western epistemology. Our theology, ecclesiology, and missiology were all prevented from learning from alternative epistemologies. We can see the continuing claims to superiority by Western epistemologies in our theological colleges globally, in our universities, and across the fields of study. What is Western is considered universal and pure; what is African, Asian, Latin American, or Pacific is considered “contextual” and therefore impure and only of secondary interest for its exoticness. Today, we are committed to working with descendants of enslaved, colonized, and Indigenous peoples to re-member, re-claim, repair, and restore such Indigenous ways of knowing because they are not inherently mutually exclusive with our Christian faith.

In short, our world is still running on the racist, gendered systems that place more obstacles on the path of opportunities for people from racialized communities than it does for the non-racialized “white” communities. Since the systems are not meant to benefit all non-racialized communities on the basis of equity, they have successfully separated their victims based on skin pigmentation and trickle-down privileges for their own “white” poor folk. This creates a divide between victims and breeds opportunities for racial prejudices, discrimination, and xenophobia as well as a groundswell of support for far-right social and political movements during economic downturns, for which the foreigner and the stranger are conveniently blamed. Sadly, these signs are visible both in our societies and in our churches, and we are challenged to make a choice: to be non-racists or to be anti-racist. What is it going to be?

Non-Racist as Opposed to Anti-Racist

The organizers of this conference should be thanked for asking for an address on the role of anti-racism in the fight against discrimination in the work of the WCC today. The key concept here is anti-racism. Allow me to expound on this concept, especially by contrasting it to another concept, that is, non-racism. While here we refer to non-racism and anti-racism, what we share here can apply to other related concepts – non-xenophobia/anti-xenophobia and non-discrimination/anti-discrimination.

For some decades, well-meaning people have been publicly confessing that they were colour-blind, that they were not racists. This was the core of what is meant in using the term “non-racist.” In simple terms, non-racism for individuals, institutions, and societies meant that an individual, institution, or society chose not to be prejudiced against people different from themselves in the course of their living and working. They were committed to making their own spaces free of racial prejudice and discrimination. While this attitude could be enforced by institutions and societies, in practice this was mostly supported at an individual level – with individuals asserting that there was no problem with racialized people. Such a non-racist attitude did not prevent one from working in

a racist institution, as long as the non-racist individual did not directly racially discriminate against another person. Non-racism did not oblige anyone to resist and dismantle racist systems: the individuals only concerned themselves with their own actions and attitudes. In such a context, the only way to overcome racism is to pray and hope for individual transformation. However, even with billions of transformed individuals, we might still fail because these individuals will not be obliged to form a community, nor will they be obliged to question the systems within which they function.

While it is important for us as individuals to be non-racist, if we are to overcome racism, xenophobia, and discrimination we must become more than simply non-racists. This is why we have promoted the idea and concept of anti-racist Christians, churches, and people. At the core of this concept are the ideas of resistance, un-learning, un-becoming, undoing, dismantling, re-imagining, re-claiming, re-learning, and re-discovering our humanity, relationships, policies, structures, and communities. To be anti-racist is to commit oneself to become an agent to overcome racism not only by choosing not to be racist but also committing oneself to take action against the racism of others, institutions, and societies and exercising the option for the racialized. Anti-racism obliges us to scan and interrogate our families, schools, churches, colleges, work, and general community environments to understand how racism, xenophobia, and discrimination are enabled in policy and practice. To be anti-racist is to choose intentionally to be uncomfortable with the norm unless the norm is anti-racist at its core. Anti-racism recognizes the power of intersections. Therefore, it looks not simply at the surface but also at the inner workings of power and authority – as racism can be overcome only at that inner core.

Racism, historically, has never been its own vehicle. It has mostly hitched a ride on other systems – enslavement, colonization, gender inequality, access to health services, education, political rhetoric and propaganda, access to economic opportunities, exposure to the consequences of climate change and environmental practices, global economic relations, banking practices and policies, conflict, migration policies, and law enforcement, judicial processes, and incarceration practices. In all these spheres, racism has found a home. To overcome racism means to rid all these spaces of racism. But for us, as Christians, anti-racism has to begin in us as individual Christians, in our local congregations and parishes, in our churches as a collective, in our mission agencies, in our theological institutions, and in the ecumenical movement at large. Then, as anti-racists, we must take our commitment to all the other spaces we listed above, acting locally in solidarity with other local actors to create a critical global anti-racist movement in Christ!

The Response of the WCC

In July 2021, the WCC reprioritized racial justice in its work by launching the transversal programme on Racism, Xenophobia, and Discrimination. By making this programme transversal, or cross-cutting, the WCC signalled a dual-pronged approach. First, the WCC is committed to making itself an anti-racist institution and anti-racist secretariat on behalf of its member churches. Second, the WCC is committed to actively exercising the option for racialized peoples globally, not only with its member churches but with all other people sharing this commitment.

This two-pronged approach and its global reach distinguish it from its predecessor, the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) of 1969. The goal of this transversal programme is to contribute to the overarching theme of “justice, reconciliation, and unity” as pronounced by the WCC’s 11th Assembly in Germany in 2022 by placing racial justice at the centre. This is because there cannot be true justice unless racial justice is achieved, and there cannot be true reconciliation unless human relations are no longer decided by the amount of melanin people have in their bodies rather than the image of God that God has generously implanted in all human beings. True unity of Christians and humankind and creation cannot exist unless justice and reconciliation have been realized in their fullness.

Our approaches currently focus on advocating and raising awareness, building capacity and increasing skills, producing resources and publications, and networking and collaboration. It might be surprising that in this day and age, we still need to raise awareness about the reality of racism, xenophobia, and discrimination, but the truth is that many do not believe racism is still a big problem, especially as enslavement and colonization ended a long time ago.

Many people associate the issue of racism only with people’s individual experiences at the hands of a few officials in strategic places, like airports or supermarkets. Systemic racism is much more devastating than these interpersonal incidences. Systemic racism is not always visible to all people, and in some cases people enforce racist policies without even realizing it. In former colonized communities, the racist logic has been thoroughly internalized and even embedded in Indigenous language. This can be seen, for example, in how success earns one the designation of “white,” thus showing that whiteness is not about skin colour but about an assigned status that can be achieved. For this reason, we have intentionally embraced a renewed commitment to decolonization and reparations as part of our approach to mission and anti-racism.

A great deal of work has been happening through the collaboration of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) and the transversal programme on Racism,

Xenophobia, and Discrimination. We are focusing our regional work to equip communities to develop the necessary competences to unmask contemporary manifestations of racism. We take seriously the platforms that are provided by the United Nations so that we can give our member churches and allies the opportunity to bring non-governmental voices into these spaces. We are also organizing workshops and seminars for WCC staff and are planning such workshops for members of our governing bodies. It is our hope that sooner rather than later, diversity, equity, and inclusion audits will become the norm in the ecumenical movement.

The CWME focus on mission from the margins implies the inclusion of Indigenous peoples and people with disabilities. These are groups that, depending on their context, also face racial discrimination and exclusion. We are helping to build capacity in our member churches and ecumenical partners on how to effectively use existing UN mechanisms for racial justice. We hope to expand such training and to develop ways to follow up with those who have taken part, including helping them to take part in sessions organized by the UN. Networking and collaborating are critical elements of this work. We cannot do this work alone. We have successfully launched the Collective for Anti-Racist Ecumenism (CARE) network. This network offers local actors from around the world a global platform to amplify their activities and to be in solidarity with actors elsewhere. At the same time, the network offers the WCC the opportunity to learn from people at the grassroots. Through the network, we stand on the cusp of creating a truly people's movement for overcoming racism.

The WCC takes seriously the production and distribution of theological and biblical resources to help us bring to the table an appropriate Christian response to the quest for racial justice in the world. We are in the process of producing an anti-racist Bible studies booklet for churches and an anti-bias toolkit for the ecumenical movement.

Finally, the WCC's 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe in 2022 stated that we need to give greater attention to challenging racism and promoting decolonization. As we embark on a Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity, we are all pilgrims and co-pilgrims on a journey of learning, sharing, praying, and walking together.

Conclusion

Racism is real. And the integrity of our faith, our work, and our being is threatened by the persistence of racism. For this reason, we need to commit ourselves intentionally to anti-racism, anti-xenophobia, and anti-discrimination. This applies to us as individuals, but more importantly it allows us to address the often subtle but vicious systemic racism, xenophobia, and discrimination that exist at the institutional level. We can continue

on the path to engage in courageous conversations and courageous actions to turn the world around to become the place God desires it to be – where people respect and love one another as human beings created in the image of God. In this mission, we bring not only our resources but our whole selves into God's purpose.