

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

To the Venerable, the 122nd General Assembly:

“All human organizations must encapsulate in their structures the love of God for the world by incorporating God’s governance in the exercise of freedom. They must recognize the image of God in every human being as the foundation of human rights and dignity, but not a foundation of human racial, class, material or gender hierarchies. It is due to God’s act of grace that God gives rights to all to partake of God’s divine governance in creation.” Timothy M. Njoya, E.H. Johnson Address, 1995.

PREAMBLE

This year’s report considers some of the most difficult issues of our day: the linkages between human rights and Canada’s trade and development policies. We look at five countries with which Canada has historical economic ties and in which our denomination has church partners: Cuba, Kenya, Nigeria, China and Guatemala. In all these countries, our strategy for human rights advocacy is closely linked to these important and long-standing partnerships.

In a supplementary response to an overture to the 1995 Assembly, we look at our response as a Church and a nation to a world that is increasingly on the move. When basic human rights are threatened, whether by persecution, war, environmental crisis, or economic distress, people are forced to leave their homes. When they come in person to our door in Canada seeking help, how should we respond? As followers of Jesus Christ, we live in the light of the tradition from the early Old Testament of respect for the stranger and “the alien who resides among you” (Exodus 12:49).

The way Canadian foreign policy addresses human rights violations is directly influenced by the effects that criticism of these violations may have on trade relationships with these countries. When the Canadian economy seems fragile and many Canadians are struggling to live on lower incomes or joining the ranks of the poor, it is understandable that many see Canada’s economic interests as the foremost goal of foreign policy.

When The Presbyterian Church in Canada criticizes human rights violations in other countries, it also considers the effect that such criticisms may have on partner churches in these countries. These partnerships reflect many generations of mission. In a post-colonial age, we still have a responsibility to act in ways that uphold and preserve their health and safety. We must support both our partner’s vision and the day-to-day struggles they encounter and seek to overcome in the name of the one God. And what about the “log” in our own eye (Matthew 7:3-5)? We have human rights questions of our own: unsettled native land claims, desperate conditions in parts of our North, and declining standards of health care and education for many. Yet if these concerns blunt our resolution to respond to the gospel witness to justice, we must admit what our silence on human rights means. In one place, it may mean that child labour will continue, and the intricate rugs that we prize will still be woven by tiny hands under inadequate lights. In another place, it may mean that protesters will be tortured and government opponents executed.

Silence then is not our option. The challenge is to know just who will pay the price for our advocacy on a particular issue. If we are forced to a choice that inflicts less suffering than another choice, we must be prepared to share that pain in our own choices about our lives and our country. We invite you to share in the burden of judging ourselves and other countries as we struggle with these questions.

A THEOLOGY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

God is always calling the church
to seek that justice in the world
which reflects the divine righteousness
revealed in the Bible.

God’s justice is seen
when we deal fairly with each other

and strive to change customs and practices that oppress and enslave others.

Justice involves protecting the rights of others.
It protests against everything that destroys human dignity.

Justice requires concern for the poor of the world.
It seeks the best way to create well-being in every society.
It is concerned about employment, education, and health, as well as rights and responsibilities.

Living Faith 8.4.1-4

The familiar language of our faith is that of privileges and responsibilities, grace and obligation. Central to our theology is the doctrine of the pervasiveness of sin in a rebellious human creation, sin that has precluded any claim to rights. But as the great Mosaic covenant promised, Yahweh became God to Israel, and Israel God's people. Israel, and we, live under Law and Promise alike. The word "rights" appears only 14 times in Scripture, whereas words like "duties" and "commandments" appear more than 230 times. But the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles denounced those who neglected those responsibilities and obligations that uphold the dignity of human beings created in God's image. Amos chastised Israel for its injustice to the poor: using false balances to cheat the peasantry of true value for their produce; enslaving or indenturing their labour for silver; or collecting the wheat left over from the harvest for the owner's profit instead of reserving it for the poor under the Law. Micah wrote that Zion was built with blood, that the judges were bribed while the nation lulled itself with the claim, "Surely the Lord is with us!" (Mic 3:11) The book of Isaiah denounced the scoundrels in control of the land who grew rich, fat and sleek while the orphan and the needy went without.

Matthew calls us to respect the poor and needy, who bear the imprint of God, especially if their economic condition is desperate.

'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ...' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (Matt. 25:37-39, *NRSV*).

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When the law is biased, when the poor are oppressed, when the stranger is turned away, when the prisoner is forgotten, human rights are violated (Amos 8:4-6; Micah 3:9-11; Isaiah 3:13-15; Jeremiah 5:26-28). These calls for justice were pleas to more powerful social groups such as religious or civil leaders, landowners, families, or ethnic groups to protect the human rights of those seeking justice in courts, of tenants and labourers, of the widow and the orphan, of the stranger in Israel, or the refugee in Babylon. Over the centuries, Christians have been tempted to use the Bible to defend slavery in the name of property rights, or executions in the name of communal rights to security. But our understanding of human rights must be grounded in the whole thrust of the gospel—that peace and justice includes the welfare of all. Within the patriarchy of New Testament society, Jesus' treatment of women and children was a radical challenge.

The temptation to divorce human relationships from worshipping God can be seen in the history of how we have translated the biblical language of justice with its rich meanings. The Hebrew *sedeq* and the Greek *dikaioisune* appear sometimes in English as "righteousness" and sometimes as "justice". In contemporary language, these words have different meanings. These differences reflect historic dichotomies in our culture between sacred and secular, private and public, spiritual and physical, moral and political. These differences have often resulted the

compartmentalization of devotional love of God and activist love of neighbour. This has often marginalized the churches from public debates, mutually impoverishing both sides of the divide.

As our historic Shorter Catechism begins, our chief priority is to love and enjoy God. But we have often failed to recognize that human rights are part of our love for God. Jesus invoked the Old Testament's linking of love of God and human relationships in the two-fold commandment (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:1-35; Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28). We cannot love God without loving our neighbour (I John 2:3-16). Our response to Jesus' invocation of the prophetic call for justice at the Nazarene gathering (Luke 4:16-21) is inextricably bound up in our experience of God's grace. The activist love of neighbour reflected in our concern for human rights flows inexorably out of a faithful devotional love of God.

Further Reading:

Canadian Council of Churches, *Challenges for the Future: The Human Rights Work of the Canadian Churches*, Toronto, May 1994.

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, *Life in All Its Fullness: The Word of God & Human Rights*, New York: American Bible Society, 1976

Njoya, Rev. Dr. Timothy, "God's Pain and Future Responsibility", Nairobi, Kenya, 1995 (available from International Ministries).

Weingartner, Erich, *The Role of the Churches in the Struggle for Human Rights*, Waterloo: Institute for Christian Ethics, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, 1993.

-----, *Protecting Human Rights: A Practical Handbook*, Geneva: Churches' Human Rights Programme in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1994

THE LANGUAGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

For many in the world, debating the language of human rights is an idle luxury, lost amid an ongoing struggle for food, water and land. Some "rights" are perceived as more valuable than others in certain quarters, especially among the privileged. Some like us try to stand with our brothers and sisters who struggle for rights that we enjoy, while at the same time benefiting from the consequences of their suffering, whether it be things we can buy cheaply or profitable investments.

When human interests, claims, needs or concerns are seen as fundamental to being human, these claims come to be defined as rights. The language of human rights gives these claims weight and legitimacy and requires states to listen to them. The secular language of human rights reflects its own history. Contemporary international statements on human rights evolved from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The Declaration was intended as a first step in the formulation of the International Bill of Human Rights, which would transform the moral principles into treaty provisions that establish legal obligations on the part of each ratifying state.

The elaboration of human rights became a three-decade long undertaking that culminated in 1976 with the entry into force of three instruments: The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and the Optional Protocol to the latter. The Covenants oblige those countries that sign and ratify them to recognize and protect a wide range of human rights, while the optional protocol provides mechanisms for individual and state complaints. What was originally meant to be a single covenant became two instead.

In the Cold War context, the East-West division manifested itself in a schism between two groups of human rights: civil and political; and economic and social. To a large extent, the concept of "cultural rights" was ignored by both sides until the resurgence of ethnic minorities and the claims for justice from aboriginal peoples forced cultural rights back on to the international human rights agenda.

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