

Statement on Poverty for Religious Leaders' Consultation on Poverty

The Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko

General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)

In the life and service of the Christian church concern for the poor and the outcast has always been a primary focus. Christ identified himself so intimately with the poor that he equated serving them with serving him:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.

Matthew 25:35-36

Lutheran theology emphasizes the principle of “neighbour-love.” In the Lutheran understanding, God’s gracious gift of freedom in Christ to all who believe is to be expressed in relation to others; it is a freedom to serve one’s neighbour, whoever that may be.

Every human being bears the image of God. But the persistence of poverty in a world with resources enough for all denies this fact. The accelerating growth of inequality between rich and poor challenges the Christian commitment to justice. This commitment unfolds socially in ways that are not unique for Christians, but are shared with many sisters and brothers of other faiths. Together with them we, as Christians, engage in a commonly held responsibility, which transcends the boundaries of nationalism, ethnicity, language, and faith.

Poverty knows no boundaries, whether geographical, political, racial, cultural or religious. It is a problem that calls for a global response. From the perspective of the church, it calls for a realization that we are a church for and with others. We cannot address poverty alone as Christians, but must engage in inter-faith and multi-sectoral collaboration for the elimination of this scourge. This is indeed the calling of the church. In this collaboration, our most important partners are those most affected - women, indigenous peoples, outcasts, the elderly and the ill. We will also be called to be a bridge between inter-governmental and inter-religious structures in the pursuit of a world free from poverty.

Diaconia is a mark of the church. No church can relinquish that aspect of its identity and witness and delegate it to others, such as specialized or secular agencies. A key challenge will therefore be for the churches to reclaim their diaconic role, to re-articulate it as comprising advocacy for justice as well as charitable action, and to make it part of daily Christian life. Christ came "so that they may have life and have it to the full" (*John 10:10*).

Those who have reaped the benefits of globalization are increasingly afflicted by what has been called ‘affluenza’. This condition distorts the values of life in fundamental ways, often leading to the relativization of human dignity. Faced with this pandemic which threatens our common future, we must, instead of glorifying wealth, strongly remind ourselves and others that "Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (*Luke 12:15*). It is our responsibility as

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religious leaders to focus on the fact, of which the Bible speaks, that "The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice." (*Proverbs 13:23*). Poverty is a curse closely connected with injustice. Addressing global poverty is not a matter of charity, but a matter of promoting justice for the poor.

Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!

(*Isaiah 10:1-2 RSV*)