

Equality before God: UEM stands against Discrimination and Racism

Statement of the MT, October 2020

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. (Isaiah 2,2)

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female. (Galatians 3,28)

Preamble

The murder of the black citizen George Floyd by white police on 25th May 2020 in Minneapolis, USA, has led to outcries in all continents worldwide and to the global movement "Black Lives Matter".

UEM contributes to the ongoing debates with its rich experiences of living with differences and struggling together for communion and justice. UEM regards itself as a communion shaped by constant processes of "growing together into a worshipping, learning and serving community, which shares gifts, insights and responsibilities, call all people for change and new life, and strives together for justice, peace and the integrity of Creation"¹.

We are aware of various forms of discrimination in our communion and in our different societies and churches, which are based on gender, economic conditions, political contexts, religion, health and physical appearance. We understand racism² as a specific form of discrimination which has multiple appearances, requires special and urgent attention, has its own history and affects attitudes, actions, political developments and systems.

We are aware that none of us and no church or other organization is free from racism and from discriminating attitudes and actions. We therefore write this statement with humility, as people enriched by the experiences in UEM but also learning constantly.

Discrimination based on racism affects all of us and involves our whole being

Racism affects all of us in multiple ways. Everybody is part of this, those who discriminate and those who are discriminated against. In the UEM communion, we realize that all of us are shaped and injured in our own ways by the multiple systems of injustice and inequality, not only as individuals, but as entire societies, nations and as humanity as a whole. To talk about this means talking about sensitive issues which affect every individual's very life and being. Discussions on racism bring to the surface each individual's experiences of trauma, anger,

¹ UEM Legal Text 2018 § 2

² The Oxford English Dictionary (Second edition 1989) defines racism as "The theory that distinctive human characteristics and abilities are determined by race." It equals it to racialism, defined as the "belief in the superiority of a particular race". The UN issued its "Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination" in 1963.

exclusion and despair – and personal encouragement gained by experiences of solidarity, unity or forgiveness. We have to respect every individual's own personal experiences, feelings and limits. We realize that sensitivity, but also clarity is required, drawing clear lines where necessary in the fight against racism.



There are multiple forms of discrimination

Discrimination and racism are complex issues. Each of us can exercise and be affected by them. One can be discriminated against in one setting and be a member of a group discriminating others in another setting –all at the same time. Different forms of discrimination must not be counted against each other and must not be leveled out. While we must be aware that there is no place without racism and discrimination we must clearly acknowledge that the legacy, history and presence of certain concrete and identifiable forms of discrimination and supremacy – e.g. white or male - have had and still have devastating and long lasting effects on specific groups of people. While respecting the complexity and omnipresence of discrimination and racism, we must (self-) critically acknowledge in each context their actual and concrete realities.

Hidden discrimination and racism

Discrimination and racism are expressed not only in conscious actions, but also unconsciously. They can be hidden in supposedly well-meaning, but patronizing attitudes, or in a refusal to accept the presence of discrimination and racism. Hidden forms of discrimination and racism can be even harder to discover, unveil and fight. Churches, congregations, missions and faith-based communities, and all of us in UEM are called to reflect self-critically our own attitudes, systems and actions and our – conscious and unconscious – processes of “othering” which have discriminating effects and lead to suppression and injustice.

Racism is rooted in attitudes of human supremacy

Attitudes of racial or other supremacy are deeply rooted in systems of thought and science, e.g. in philosophies, theological or political convictions. They have been broadly and systematically implemented, transmitted and justified through educational systems and wrong theological interpretations. Such attitudes played decisive roles in making slavery and colonialism possible, but they are alive to this day in different regions and contexts. They have shaped all of us, and to overcome them requires constant reflection and action.

Reflecting the history and the presence of white supremacy must be part of any action against racism in whatever form it appears in different parts of the world.

Racism and discrimination are legitimized in different ways

Racism and discrimination are often legitimized by nationalism, ethnicity, culture, religion or by so-called common sense or traditional values. In many countries populist, extremist and right wing parties are misusing origin, colour of skin, religious identities or ethnic relationships to promote and justify discriminatory practices and legislation, to divide people, to spread hate and to rationalise the supremacy of some over others. Such legitimations must be uncovered and dismantled - by research, public communication and protests, in individual talks and encounters.

Economic injustices are both cause and effect of racism and discrimination



It is impossible to fight against forms of discrimination and racism without tackling global and local economic inequalities and their implications. At the same time, it is impossible to fight economic injustice without looking at the power relations which are used as instruments to sustain inequalities and exploitation. All fighting against racism and discrimination must be linked with struggles for justice and equality. For example, we need to compare the resources taken from the southern hemisphere with the foreign aid given to these countries, and opt for fairer exchanges.

Discrimination and racism work through political marginalization

People affected by racism and discrimination are facing political marginalization. They are not granted full access to education, health care, housing, job opportunities etc. They are prevented from making their voices heard in the political discourse of their societies. These forms of discrimination and exclusion are exercised by individuals as well as by groups within societies or governments which do not abolish discriminatory legislation, sanction and punish racist discrimination or even introduce discriminatory rules.

Empowered by God's vision: Struggling together

We acknowledge that theology has been and is still being misused in order to justify discrimination and racism, and we critically and self-critically denounce all such ways. We trust in

- God's grace. All of us have received God's grace and have been made equal in our communion and fellowship. This fundamental belief challenges the global inequalities in which we live.
- Communion as God's gift. Our communion cannot be built completely by ourselves. In order to uphold and sustain it, we depend on joint prayer, bible study and exchange.
- Forgiveness and liberation. We are aware that we are all shaped by the sinful nature of humans. We confess that all forms of racism and discrimination are sins before God and need repentance and liberation. God's forgiveness empowers us to start afresh each day our fights against racism and discrimination, both within and around us.
- Being called to speak and act prophetically. We are sent to draw lines and speak out against injustice and violence.
- Being sent to serve. We cooperate with non-members, other faith adherents, global and local social and political actors and non-government organizations (NGO).
- Unity in diversity (1. Cor. 12, 12-31). Our struggle against racism and discrimination is motivated and rooted in the Biblical visions of unity for the fullness of life.

UEM Identity: A worshipping, learning and serving community

The UEM constitution of 1996 sees UEM set in a "world torn apart". This description holds true to this day. The restructuring of UEM from a German-based mission society into an international communion of churches in 1996 aimed at overcoming racism and discrimination and creating a structure to foster unity and common growth. We have learnt that we can find orientation together when we share, exchange and widen our perspectives, allowing other, sometimes distant or strange perspectives. We are committed to abandoning privileges and comfort zones and to continue transforming ourselves to be a faithful communion.

Continuing our joint journey in mission: Global Learning in Ecumenical Perspectives (GLEP)



UEM is a learning and evaluating organization. It aims to avoid the patterns of “we here” and “they there”. The process “Global Learning in Ecumenical Perspectives” aims at a still stronger and clearer internationalization and diversification of all dimensions of UEM. Members are called to plan, organize, staff, structure, communicate, fund and develop UEM’s work jointly.

We aim to bring the issues of discrimination and racism into discussions, work in internationally composed and diverse teams and utilize the experiences of different churches worldwide. Moreover, UEM will treat the issues of racism and discrimination in global and local programs according to the needs of its members.

That they all may be one!

United Evangelical Mission
(www.vemission.org)
The Management Team
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