

## **God's Kaleidoscope - The International and Ecumenical Call to Racial Justice Breathing Life - conference**

We all different people are part of this world, and we should see each other with respect. At the ecumenical and international Breathing Life conference on racism and justice, we were invited to look at the world from such a perspective. The conference was **a unique event** worldwide. It brought together representatives of churches from 31 countries. Participants from Finland: Esther Kamau, Saija Kainulainen, Laura Huovinen and Tomi Karttunen from Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland, Clementine Nishimwe from Helsinki university.

On **the first day** of the conference (on November 9, 2023 in Freiburg, Germany) we **participated in a Vigil at the Synagogue Memorial, a moment of remembrance** at the pool made as a memorial on the floor of the synagogue in Freiburg and we remembered all those who were persecuted during the holocaust. That persecution targeted Jews and many other marginal groups, such as Romani people and sexual minorities and disabled people. We all have a responsibility to learn from the mistakes of history. Since the October 7th attack on Israel, anti-Semitic hate speech has further intensified and it is important to decide now to do good. ***The work against racism should be the goal of all Christians***, said Leslie Nathaniel in the opening speech of the conference. (Nathaniel has been involved in preparing the Breathing Life document of the European Diocese, which was one of the guidelines in the planning of the conference.)

**Leaders** have a particularly **important role** in bringing out the problems related to racism. Bishop Robert Innes said in his opening speech that the churches in Europe have now woken up to see the problems related to racism. It's time to think about **how we can change our attitudes**. The Church of England, led by Archbishop Justin Welby, is committed to this work. Brunel James, from the Church of England's Racial Justice Unit, stressed that **culture change is now our job**, so that we can create a new kind of equal community. **Opposing racism is an important common ecumenical task**. We have to work together to reduce inequality and we have to find the hidden problems. **Different cultures must be seen** in the communities (including the small cultures of the communities).

The First day's message of the conference was

### **I Grieving the past together and hoping for the best for us**

**Grieving together is important**. We are saddened by phenomenon such as racism, colonialism and apartheid. Grieving together is a social event that unites and is ultimately wholesome. And people who have concrete experience and grief about racism should be brought together. It is necessary to support people who have faced racism, and it is important to unite together to work for justice.

**Hope is needed in the fight against racism**. John the Baptist (Mark 1: 4-15) lived homeless outside of community and civilization in the margins and Jesus met him and faced him as a person. The story is about **baptism**. In baptism, **a new person** and **a new community** of the baptized are created, which involves

ethical responsibility and the spirit of peace as well as reconciliation, justice and freedom. Baptism obliges and directs to give to those in need. As God's loved ones, Christians have concrete hope for God's kingdom, where Love and justice go hand in hand. Justice is what love looks like in public.

**The true message of hope from the loving God (Jesus) changes the direction for good.** We need an anti-racist partnership with many people, and we need to speak out about the problems with courage. **Human rights issues are issues of faith for Christians.** In Christianity doctrine and practice are connected. They go hand in hand. Humans should be God's co-workers. Resistance healing to hurtful phenomenon comes through the Gospel and the Holy Spirit. Each person is defined as God's creation. We are together, we are the world! Love is all we need.

The Second day's message of the conference was

## **II The present as a challenge**

The goal of the conference is to create a church that concretely welcomes everyone and where racism has no place. **The Canaanite woman** (Matthew 15: 21-28) recognizes Jesus as the son of David and she demands Jesus to confront her. Jesus responds to a woman's human need, human dignity. He sees a human being and the great faith. Jesus did not bring a new religion into the world, but he brought life into the world.

**It is especially important to work together on world religions because there are multi-religious communities all over the world.** Currently, there are many different conflicts in the world, which always involve attitudes towards others. Mercy and forgiveness are as guidelines for the path of peace. According to Azza Karam, **we need to bring more grace to different communities.** Cooperation between religions is the oldest peace work in the world. Religions have common interests. If we are hurt, then **we should strive to turn to the path of forgiveness**, even if this journey is long.

**About cooperation.** Face-to-face cooperation is important, **because when we are present to each other, there is always a dimension of the sacred.** Deepening the relationship with other religions can **deepen our understanding of our own religion and this in turn helps even more in dialogue with others.** Sometimes we have **to build a bridge** across the riverbed to move forward (bridge over troubled water). Often, however, the longest journey we take is the journey to our own heart. Especially for people with a painful history, the journey is difficult. Change happens when we look each other in the face. We should be able to see different shades in others instead of seeing only black or white. Jesus is everyone's friend and comforter. Jesus came so that people might have life.

**A concrete hope to abolish racism.** We should give people concrete hope, so not just by saying "I'm praying for you". Praying is good, it is communicating with God, but we need to communicate with each

other's too. Man is created to reflect the image of God. It is important to realize that we are part of the whole of the one body of Jesus. What makes a person whole is that he/she is rooted in faith in his/her heart and this helps a person believe in his own dreams and look for love.

**The task of the churches is to offer a vision that gives hope and the necessary realism:** the world is not black or white but a spectrum of different shades. At the same time, we need to be aware of the limitations of our own activity.

The Third day's message of the conference was

### **III Vision of the future**

**The Galatians bore the burden of racist stereotypes (Gal. 3:23-29).** According to the Romans, the Galatians were wild and uncontrollable violent people, and only Roman Civilization could tame them. However, Paul testified that the Galatians have an inheritance that belongs to all others of Christ, through faith and through grace, so no longer submit to slavery.

**Recognition, reconciliation and justice are for everyone.** In the vision, justice belongs to everyone. In a just society, people should share all the good that there is, such as material and spiritual good, for example knowledge and freedom. **Fairness is the most important value.** When a person recites a confession of faith, it is a confession of a good life. The vision is rooted in the Bible and in this vision justice is for everyone. Justice has two meanings, one of which means to be right and the other to make healthy (according to Klaus Schäfer). **God brings justice that is truly good and wholesome and meets human need. All creation is called into the vision.** Even the wolf and the sheep live peacefully together in the end.

**Racism is an unfair attitude in many kinds of activities.** Already at the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968, it was stated that racism is a sin. Now we have to face colonialism and its history in a new way and its influence on the present world. Racism exists in various structures that maintain it. **Structures related to racism should be examined critically.** Racism occurs in contexts where people are trying to benefit. In Finland we need to face our history too (e.g. in Finland **the Sámi and the Romani people**). Also issues of **gender justice** and the fact that **discrimination against women** is also accompanied by attitudinal injustice. **Cooperation between generations** should also be developed and voices across generational boundaries should be listened to.

**The world should be seen as a whole,** where **nature** has the right to receive justice. People have a duty to protect nature, but the wrong attitude causes destruction in the environment. People have to change their attitudes, because **when nature suffers, so does man.** Climate change is a global human rights issue.

We should see people that we haven't paid attention to and that we haven't seen or wanted to see before.

**We cannot examine justice if we do not examine the distribution of power and this examination must be continued and done with Jesus.**

## Summary and reflection.

It is important to ask what kind of church and community we want. We envision a good life where there is freedom to be what we were created for and participation in the community, which we realize with the help of the good news of the gospel and by praying. We should give concrete hope to all people, but especially to those who have no hope and to those who are treated unfairly. There are practical ways to do this.

We should see people we don't often see. The church should go to see people who have hidden and disappeared from society and bring them into joint plans and decision-making. Education to raise awareness for everyone would be important. The role of the leaders of churches and society is significant when advancing the vision of justice. We must acknowledge and highlight the existence of racism and unjust structures and we must create and build an atmosphere of safety in our churches, society, communities, families and children. **Grace Fagan-Stewart** (leads the Safeguarding team in the European Diocese of the Church of England) **called to pray together** in accordance with the Archbishop's call. She also wondered if there should be **a special safeguarding program related to racism**. Churches should take into account different people and bring people who have a personal view about racism to the planning workgroups, because there are too few of them. Cooperation in religious dialogue between different confessions is particularly important because the Christian gospel challenges us to love everyone and defend those who suffer.

**Art** can be a significant challenger in how we see the world. In Western art, it is still strongly visible that the people of the biblical world are pale, but this image has also been challenged.

**The young participants of the conference** emphasized that it should be self-evident that skin colour should not matter in who we see, pay attention to and who we help. According to the young people, the work of integration is important and it is also important that a wide variety of people deal with this issue of racism and justice. Young people see that multicultural Christianity is the future.