



Global Ministries and Human Rights

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I have a “peacekeeper” blue United Nations flag draped over my office door. It was given to me by a dear colleague who recently passed away. A denominational leader who was committed to strengthening the Church’s collaboration with the international body, she would often remind me that the churches played an important role in the founding of the League of Nations, in helping shape the Charter of its successor, the United Nations, and in helping promote and secure ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and various UN Human Rights Covenants. As I reflected on her and the integral work of the UN in protecting human rights, I considered the ways Global Ministries works to uphold human rights around the world.

Our work on human rights continues at the UN. As accredited Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), religious groups like Global Ministries have a voice and place at the table when civil society organizations consult with Missions and UN staff on issues of peace and security, social and economic development, environmental sustainability, and the protection of universal human rights. At major global summits and in routine working groups, faith groups present a generally unified witness that affirms human rights, based on the shared belief that God endows all creation with divine worth, and demands justice and dignity for all in human affairs.

Global Ministries works with partners around the world in many ways to promote peace and human rights. In our Guiding Principles we “commit ourselves to engage in dialogue, witness, and common cause with people of other faiths and movements with whom we share a vision of peace, justice, and integrity of creation.” Overseas mission worker Bruce Van Voorhis, now in India, worked for many years with the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) in Hong Kong.

One of the Commission's priorities he focused on was the chronic abuse of human rights in the Philippines. As a co-convenor of the Hong Kong Campaign for the Advancement of Human Rights and Peace in the Philippines, he worked to bring pressure across Asia to respond to the upsurge of extrajudicial killings of human rights leaders and advocates for the poor in the country.

AHRC efforts have been part of a broader Global Ministries campaign against this violence in the Philippines, which has tragically included the arbitrary arrest, disappearance, torture and murder of church leaders, including those of our partner, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. We have accompanied our global partners in their efforts to end government-sanctioned abuses and strengthen the rights of the poor. Global Ministries has sponsored volunteers as monitors in Philippines national elections, supported Philippines church leaders in visits to testify on extrajudicial killings and human rights violations in Congressional hearings and U.S. churches, provided written testimony on the matter to Congress and the UN Human Rights Council, and met to petition UN, U.S. and Philippines officials on the issue.

One strategy of the advocacy campaign has been to increase U.S. and Philippines government accountability for human rights by targeting U.S. military appropriations to the long-time ally. The persistent awareness-raising, action alerts and letter writing of concerned religious and advocacy organizations, including Global Ministries and our ecumenical partners in the U.S. and around the world, were instrumental in eventually conditioning a portion of U.S. annual foreign assistance on a State Department review and verification of human rights compliance by the Philippines government. Our efforts continue though, and in 2012 Global Ministries will again sponsor Philippines church leaders in visits to the U.S., including in March at Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, DC, and later to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Global Ministries has sponsored or supported recent resolutions through our board or at General Assembly that call the Church's attention to other situations of human rights under threat, such as those of children abused by the conflict in the Congo, victims of human trafficking, and victims of torture. In a 2010 resolution, the Common Global Ministries Board highlighted the severe human rights abuses perpetuated in many countries against homosexuals and other sexual minorities, urging communities of faith around the world to speak out against this injustice, and governments to raise the issue in international fora. In late 2011 advocates were encouraged when the Obama Administration publically asserted that this would be a human rights priority of U.S. foreign relations.

While universal human rights, as well as fundamental political and civil rights have been recognized, there is much work to do to protect the rights of particular racial, religious and sexual minorities; of the disabled; of prisoners and those living under occupation; of migrants, refugees and other uprooted persons; and of indigenous populations. Many of these rights

have been articulated in various international conventions and protocols, but in many cases still lack sufficient global recognition to bear on diplomatic or the moral obligation of states, much less enforcement under international law. Moreover, as we work with partners around the world to address hunger and poverty, we increasingly identify certain basic human needs such as food and water as rights in need of protection.

Unfortunately, in some cases the United States is a major obstacle to the full enactment of many human rights conventions. The U.S. has yet to ratify various international rights conventions, including on the Rights of the Child, the Rights of Migrant Workers, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT). Consistent with various General Assembly Resolutions, we continue to lift up the need to strengthen such human rights protections in our justice advocacy.

Global Ministries engages in the work of the Church around the world through a network of ecumenical partnerships established over centuries of shared mission, community building, and common witness. In countless ways Global Ministries facilitates Disciples and UCC churches in sharing not only life-sustaining resources and personnel, but also in expressions of solidarity and in joint advocacy to advance human rights and the common good.