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AS WRITTEN

WCC'S INTERVENTION AT THE UN WORLD CONFERENCE

ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

CAIRO 5-13 SEPTEMBER 1994

Mr. President,

The World Council of Churches is grateful to the members of the Preparatory Committee and the Secretary General for having provided a comprehensive agenda for a global approach to some of the most urgent questions confronting the world today. With 324 member churches of the Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox Christian traditions, located in every region of the world, the World Council of Churches is very much aware that these questions are not only urgent but also complex. Only an integrated approach, which does not isolate population from other indicators of human and environmental well-being, can offer hope for progress toward a more just, egalitarian and humane society.

Christian theology and ethics consider issues related to population and development as questions of justice and injustice, and thus intimately related to power and powerlessness. The debate cannot be responsibly engaged without recognizing how it is shaped by the imbalance of power, and its effects on poor people, people of color and women. This is especially pronounced in situations which migrants face. A Christian response to issues regarding population and development will advocate for substantial social reforms, among them more equitable distribution of land and income, better opportunities for education and employment, elimination of discrimination based on race or gender and substantial improvements in access to affordable housing, food and health care. Participation of all the people in determining policies is critical to such social reforms.

The WCC is concerned that the present debate tends to link population with an idea of development that presupposes sustained economic growth. Indeed, we would contend that it is better to place the issues of population in the context of improving the quality of life. Quality of life is enhanced when people can attain their full potential, when the full spectrum of human rights is respected, when people are subjects rather than objects of policies, when they can make choices in life, and most of all, when basic and spiritual needs are fulfilled.

The WCC has affirmed the versatility and endurance of the family under pressure from rapid changes in society. The family as the basic social unit prepares individuals for changing social conditions. WCC acknowledges that a great variety of patterns of family life exist, ranging from the traditional extended family through smaller family units to the nuclear family and the single-parent family. There is no

single normative model of what a family should be.

Mr. President, much of the religious discourse and the debate leading up to this World Conference has been focused on the difficult ethical, theological and doctrinal issues related to human sexuality and especially on family planning, contraception and abortion. Among the churches within the fellowship of the World Council there is a wide spectrum of approaches to these issues. While respecting these differences, we are seeking to encourage and maintain an open, constructive dialogue on them, both among ourselves and with other churches and people of other faiths.

Though there is a variety of positions among member churches of WCC, many of them assert the right of families to practice fertility regulation by various methods. We do not accept the use of abortion as a family planning method. However, among WCC member churches there are some who hold that debates regarding abortion which do not recognize the concrete realities of women's lives that shape the context in which abortion decisions must be made are not credible. A growing number recognizes that the unjust treatment and systemic exploitation of women make legal recourse to safe, voluntary abortion a moral necessity. Dogmatic assertions which affirm the sanctity of life but ignore the context in which conception takes place fail to bring that assertion to bear on the real circumstances of life.

Mr. President, several specific problems which women in so-called Third World nations and poor women in many industrialized nations are facing need urgently to be corrected. Among these are:

* vertically- imposed family planning programmes with statistical targets and various incentives;

* use of controversial forms of contraception, which poses threats to the integrity and health of women;

* social, traditional and cultural practices and constraints which perpetuate the subjugation of women.

These problems disproportionately affect certain groups of women, e.g. black, Indigenous and poor women.

We hope, that this conference will stimulate more just, effective and humane approaches which ensure the quality of life of women, men and children everywhere.

This cause is worthy of our best efforts.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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