

**SIXTY YEARS OF HOPE:
THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS
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Jesus said, “I have come in order that you might have life in all its fullness.” His self-described calling included release of the captives, sight for the blind, and liberty for the oppressed. These signaled Jesus’ unique concern for human rights—what is ours by virtue of the fact that we are created as children of God. The phrase “human rights” is not biblical. The biblical message uses the language of justice, freedom, peace, and security. These concepts are woven into the biblical fabric: the historical narratives, the books of the law, the prophetic teachings, wisdom in proverbs and the psalms, Jesus knew them as vital requirements for human fulfillment. They resonate throughout Jesus’ teachings, the writings of the disciples, and in Revelation.

In 1945, the newly adopted United Nations Charter included in its four mandates “. . . the reaffirmation of faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women . . .” In 1948, by adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U.N. provided articulation for that faith. It asserted, in fact, that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world . . .”

Unlike the U.N. Charter, which reaffirmed the traditional rights and obligations of states, the Universal Declaration is about individuals: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights . . . endowed with reason and conscience. . . . Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in [the] Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. . . . Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.” Those words were revolutionary—challenging every known political, social, and cultural system, and in time challenging the U.N. itself. While the Universal Declaration stressed rights, they were explicitly and implicitly linked to the concept of responsibility.

For post-World War II generations, this revolutionary conceptualization of human rights may well be noted. While now commonplace, before World War II the term “human rights” was not part of political or public vocabulary. The dominant focus was on the rights of the state or sovereign ruler, with individuals as subjects. At that time, as it is now, states and those in authority often were the major abusers of rights of their own citizens and others.

The political impact of the Universal Declaration, which established the norms as the “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations,” took place in the subsequent movement that translated the declaration’s content into the laws and standards of states and the international community. Today, nearly 100 declarations and treaties elaborate on virtually every aspect of the original declaration, giving guidance in the difficult task of transforming human, state, and societal behavior. They have been accepted by the international community as universal; inclusive of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights; and they belong to women and children as well as to men. While countries, cultures, and groups can claim they were not part of the original process, the subsequent process has established the universalism in law

and standards and was confirmed by unanimous statements at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and the Millennium Assembly of the U.N. in 2000.

The sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration is cause for renewed hope. But it calls for renewed commitment to ensure realities reflect the norms. Norms and laws are a necessary aspect of human community, but they are not sufficient. The changes required to establish cultures of peace and non-violence, of tolerance and compassion, are slow in coming. Indeed, if we understand human nature, these changes will be a never-ending process. Human rights continue to be abused in a multitude of ways and places, seen every day in the realities of war, slavery, trafficking, exploitation of children, social and cultural exclusions, economic deprivation, religious and racial intolerance, and all forms of violence—individual and systemic. The anniversary of the declaration also is cause for Christian reflection and rededication in service to the One who came to provide life in all its fullness, even Jesus Christ.

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NOTES

The 210th General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted to “celebrate the affirmation of the dignity and value of human life affirmed in the ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ and the International Bill of Human Rights, rejoicing in the hope that has been given to multitudes around the world; grateful for the vision that still inspires those who work and hope for a more humane future for all.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Presbyterian United Nations Office

www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/un/index.htm

60th Anniversary Universal Declaration of Human Rights

www.un.org/events/humanrights/udhr60/

Human Rights Day Worship Resources

www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/worship/worship.htm#rightsday

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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