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Item 4 - Human Rights

Item 3b - Education

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World Council of Churches

Madam Chairperson, distinguished members of the Permanent Forum.

I wish firstly to acknowledge the Haudenoshonee nation, the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today.

I am Peter Smith, a descendant of the Kamilaroi people of Australia. I speak on behalf of the World Council of Churches. (WCC)

The Australian Bureau of Statistics confirms that "At the time of the first European settlement," (or invasion, depending on your point of view) "there were about 250 distinct languages comprising more than 500 dialects spoken in Australia. The subsequent expansion of Europeans into the continent resulted in the loss of many languages and dialects as many speakers died and others shifted to speaking other Indigenous languages, English or Creoles." Our people in fact were prohibited from speaking their own language on the government reserves and subsequently in church sponsored institutions. We have heard here in this forum similar situations in other parts of the world, colonized by Europeans, a policy which accelerated the loss of our languages .

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has addressed the issue of the rights of Indigenous Peoples since the 1980s, however the WCC, until now has not spoken clearly on the issue of their languages.

The WCC is concerned by the phenomena of loss of the world's languages. According to the figures put out by UNESCO, on average one of the world's languages is lost every two weeks. It is estimated that up to 90% of the world's 6,700 languages will become extinct by the end of the century. Indigenous languages carry critical knowledge about how to maintain bio-diversity in the given place of the community and thus can provide means to sustain life of the planet. Increasingly, scholars are recognizing the critical link between linguistic diversity and bio-diversity acknowledging an analogous relationship between the two.

The mission history of the churches has many ambiguities, one of which is in relation to Indigenous Peoples languages. In many instances Bible translation has helped to preserve and develop indigenous language, while in others the policy of the use of colonial language has had an adverse impact.

There is a need to revitalize the world's indigenous languages with respect to cultural, intellectual and spiritual diversity of humankind. These languages carry a storehouse of indigenous knowledge, accrued and refined over millennia – knowledge essential for understanding local ecosystems, medicinal use of plants, specialized agronomies and careful adaptations to regional environments.

In view of the need to protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples, particularly their languages, the WCC reiterates its support for the right of self-determination and sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples as they are defined in church and society and call upon the Permanent Forum and where specified member churches:

- The Permanent Forum through ECOSOC to ask the UN to establish an International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2006 or a subsequent year;
- The Permanent Forum through ECOSOC to appeal to relevant governments to remove discriminatory laws against Indigenous languages, to work towards removing the layers of educational and social pressures arrayed against Indigenous languages, and to actively pursue compliance with international conventions and treaties that regard the use of the language of heritage as a basic human right;
- The Permanent Forum through ECOSOC to call on member states of the United Nations to resolve their outstanding differences and disagreements to pave the way for the signing of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which specifically protects indigenous language rights;
- The Permanent Forum through ECOSOC to call on all states with Indigenous populations to sign and ratify ILO's 1989 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169 which includes Indigenous Language rights in Articles 28 and 30;
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- The Permanent Forum to ask the UN through ECOSOC to raise as a high priority the need to protect the global linguistic diversity and to provide NGOs and foundations concerned with Indigenous issues, relevant funding and structural support as communities around the world seek to keep alive the heart of their ancient traditions through their Indigenous languages;

Member churches of the WCC:

- to remind churches and the Christian community of the diversity of spoken languages as a sign of the presence of the fullness of the Spirit of God and the full diversity of languages as an integral part of the vision of worship in the presence of God;
- to continue to support language-based services and activities, especially scripture translation with members societies of the United Bible Society which is currently translating into 500 to 600 languages, providing an important catalyst for language stabilization and development;
- encourage churches to reflect on their role and possible complicity in patterns of cultural repression through boarding schools for Indigenous children or other agencies and processes;
- request churches to consider practical ways in which they can respond to this world-wide crisis, calling attention to the critical issue of language loss and working towards remedies both in their local areas and at international level;

Madam chairperson, my sisters and brothers, thank you.

Material used to present intervention:

Australian Bureau of Statistics – Australian Social Trends 1999.

World Council of Churches Central Committee ‘Statement on Human Rights and Languages of Indigenous Peoples’ (Adopted 21 February 2005)