



*Eglise Protestante
Unie de Belgique*



*Verenigde Protestantse
Kerk in België*

To the attention of :

National Council of Churches of Christ USA
c/o Mr. Jim Winkler, President and General Secretary
110 Maryland Avenue NE
Suite 108
Washington, DC 20002-5603
United States of America

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Brussels, March 6, 2017.

Dear sisters and brothers,

Grace and peace be with you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord!

We live in turbulent times at both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In Belgium, we are looking with perplexity at developments in your good country after the election of President Donald Trump. We are especially concerned about what the policies of the new Administration may mean for the environment, climate change and God's Creation, for vulnerable people in your country as well as those in the larger world, for refugees and asylum seekers, for peace in the world, for the future of Israel and Palestine, for race relations, and for relations between religions. With pain in our hearts we see how polarisation and divisions are stoked up and growing, how society is fractioning, and how populist policies seem to be gaining ground. It is also very worrying to witness the sustained attack by President Trump on the media which he describes as 'very dishonest' and as 'the enemy of the American people'. A free press is one of the important pillars of democracy and, as such, should be protected even if we may disagree with some of the opinions which they may hold.

The US has long been one of the world's strongest voices for freedom of conscience and human dignity but now seems to depart violently from that tradition. A case in point is the Administration's policy regarding immigration and refugees. Arbitrarily singling out and refusing entry into the US of refugees coming from largely Muslim countries does not only go against the Convention of Geneva but also against the very foundations and values on which your country is based. Of course the US government has the task to do whatever it can to promote the safety and security of its citizens. Terrorism is a very real threat, all over the world. Obviously, effective screening policies need to be in place to monitor people with extremist opinions and to detect persons who want to enter our countries with bad intentions. However, we should not assume that all persons coming from a specific country or region are by definition suspicious. Fighting extremism with illiberalism can have dangerous consequences. It can hand a propaganda victory to groups like ISIS and can stoke up resentment among (young) radicalised Muslims.

More importantly for us as Christians is that such policies go against the heart of the Gospel where we read, for example in Matthew 25, that society is judged according to the question whether we welcomed the stranger and fed the hungry. Our attitude towards the vulnerable people is about our attitude to Christ himself. In this, we are aware of the fact that Jesus has also been a refugee. People

fleeing from war and persecution need our support independent of their country of origin, race or religion. In God there is no partiality, writes the Apostle Paul (Romans 2:11). We are very much heartened by the fact that so many churches and religious leaders in the US, including the NCCCUSA, have spoken out clearly against the policies of the new Administration on the issue of refugee and immigration policies as well as with regard to other important themes. We also praise God for the longstanding commitment found in your member churches, as well as other churches and religious communities, for peace with justice, for seeing a refugee in the first place as a human being made in the image of God, and for generously welcoming strangers in your midst. Through this, you are truly setting up signs of the Kingdom.

As we address the situation in the USA, we are very mindful of the fact that we also have a vast agenda in Europe. While a wall is being built between the US and Mexico, we in our continent are busy erecting fences to keep out 'unregulated' groups of refugees. While you have to put up with derogatory language and inflammatory rhetoric, we receive our share from populist leaders at this side of the ocean. While polarisation is rife in your country, we in Europe witness the rise of populist parties which strive on setting up groups of citizens against each other.

To some extent, the dynamics are similar and the anger of citizens stems from similar social, economic and political developments. We can understand some of the reasons for this anger and the rebellion against the 'elite': stagnant pay, unemployment, rising inequality and complacency as industrial regions suffer long-term decline. All this, combined with the feeling of not being heard and recognised, create fertile ground for populist policies and an anti-establishment rage. As churches we have to confess that, in general, we may have ignored this for too long.

Also in our part of the world, a disdain for international cooperation is growing. The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union ('Brexit') is a case in point but in many other countries we can see a rise of political parties which advocate an angry kind of nationalism. We agree with critics who state that lots of things are wrong with the European Union; such issues need to be addressed urgently lest our people lose their trust in international cooperation. At the same time, we know that such wrongs are nothing at all when set against what came before on our continent, e.g. in the first half of the 20th century. From our European history we know that rising angry nationalism has often provided a backdrop for disastrous wars.

Making America, or for that matter Europe, Great Again is, in our view, to let ourselves be inspired by Luke 10:25-39 about the Good Samaritan (the 'Good Foreigner' in our days?), to reach out in compassion to those who flee from wars, violence and oppression, to protect the vulnerable, to take care of God's good Creation, to build bridges instead of walls, and to defend human rights. If America is first in those areas, it is truly great. If Europe can manage that, we can be a beacon of hope in this world.

Dear sisters and brothers, we write this letter to you because we believe it is good to hold each other's hands in solidarity across the ocean in our common struggle for justice, peace and human dignity. Together we also need to fold our hands in joint prayer to our Lord to ask him to inspire, encourage and support us through the Holy Spirit in our ministry to set up signs of God's Reign.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'S. Fuite', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Steven H. Fuite,
President of the United Protestant Church in Belgium