

# RESOLUTIONS

## from the 9th All Africa Conference of Churches' General Assembly

by Keith Vermeulen

**The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) held its ninth General Assembly during 6-12 December 2008 in Maputo, Mozambique. Two representatives from the Southern African Network to End Corporal and Humiliating Punishment of Children (SANECHP) had the opportunity to attend and do presentations at this meeting. This article presents a summary of what was discussed and the resolutions taken.**

The AACC is an ecumenical fellowship representing more than 120 million Christians through 173 member organisations spanning 39 African countries. This forum works towards making a difference in the lives of the people of Africa through ministries of advocacy and maintaining a presence at continental, regional and local levels.

In 2007, the AACC chose as its advocacy theme: "The Church Awakens: New Hope for the African Child" in order to focus its ongoing advocacy efforts on the plight of the African child, since it regards this as one of the most serious and pressing social issues facing this continent.

At the ninth Assembly, an entire afternoon was assigned to the "Children's Track" continuing the AACC's intention to highlight its ongoing advocacy for the African child. The afternoon allowed space for the following:

- A presentation by a panel of young people on different issues of concern (including sexual abuse and trafficking);
- Input on the biblical and theological mandate of ministering to children;
- The launch of the recent AACC publication on children's rights and ministries entitled "*Do Not Stop Them*"; and
- A panel discussion on different child rights issues.

In their presentation the young people made an urgent and strong appeal for adults to listen to them and also hear them in their homes and within families. They also called on the Church to "give space to children" and for church leaders to participate in the resolution of social conflict where children were being abused in homes and at schools. They questioned the

possibility of "a better world" where the abuse of children threatens to spiral into ongoing abuse of children by adults who were abused as children. As one of the children put it, "if we listen and talk and deal with abuse, the word will spread that ... children need love, affection and protection ..."

During the panel discussion on child rights issues, Keith Vermeulen (a member of SANECHP) presented broadly on the notion that children's rights are human rights, as children are human too. He also drew the meeting's attention to the fact that although child rights activists and church workers spoke different "languages", the vision of rights activists for a world based on human dignity and equity is shared by the Church. Churches, however, need to dialogue more on where and why they believe their religious rights, traditions and practices conflict with human rights - and in this case children's rights.

Carol Bower then presented the Southern African Network's submission, calling for support from the AACC for the prohibition of all forms of corporal and humiliating punishment in all spheres of a child's life, including within the home. The submission presented the context of corporal and humiliating punishment within the reality of global and continental violence against children. Secondly, it noted that corporal punishment by parents - as recorded in the *All Africa Special Report on Ending Legalised Violence against Children* - is still legalised in all African States. Finally, the submission highlighted the serious effects of degradation and resentment that corporal and humiliating punishment have on children.

While there was no time for greater interaction, the Steering Committee of the General Assembly took on board several recommendations that will affect the AACC's further advocacy on ministries, practices and the rights of children.

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## THE WAY FORWARD AND RESOLUTIONS ON ADVOCACY FOR THE AFRICAN CHILD: A SUMMARY

The meeting decided that, in order for children's issues to be addressed, the Church needs to incorporate children's issues in their core business and ensure participation from children and youth. A "way forward" document (which may be accessed at [www.aacc-ceta.org](http://www.aacc-ceta.org)) was prepared and is intended to assist and stir the AACC and its member churches into action on behalf of children. Drawing on the various inputs and calls for action, the document also calls for a subsequent report-back to the Assembly every five years. What follows below is the substance of the conference resolutions taken (however, the final version may contain certain textual variations).

### 1. Biblical mandate

The Church in Africa, like all churches, is given a biblical mandate to minister to children. The ministry of the Church is to empower children to attain their fullest, God-given potential physically, psychologically, spiritually, socio-culturally and economically. This will prepare them to become agents for transformation in their communities, to the glory of God. The document challenges the Church to realise that the failure to minister to children is an omission of its Great Commission.

### 2. The voice of children

Through their participation in a plenary session of the ninth General Assembly, the children demonstrated that they have the capacity to engage adults in meaningful dialogue. Therefore, the Assembly resolved that children should be regular participants within the AACC and its member churches.

### 3. Ambassadors to the future

The Assembly recommended that the AACC member churches select two children - a boy and a girl, aged between 8 and 12 - to serve as child ambassadors for a period of five years. It further recommended that the National Councils select at least two child/youth delegates to the AACC General Assembly in 2013.

### 4. Parental education

The Church acknowledges that the family is central to the stability of any society. Therefore, the Assembly resolved that its member churches be encouraged to creatively integrate "Christian Parenting" (or modules thereof) into lay and clerical training.

### 5. Child rights

The Assembly resolved that all AACC member churches follow up and act through their National Councils to ensure that:

- a. Their country has an action plan to implement the articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- b. Their country is implementing child welfare and protection strategies as contained in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child;
- c. Their country has child protection legislation to protect the rights and welfare of all children;
- d. Their country has passed legislation that outlaws all forms of "corporal and humiliating punishment" of children.

#### **6. Day of the African child**

The Assembly emphasised that 16 June, the Day of the African Child, be highlighted in church calendars. Churches were challenged to promote this date, to share messages to and from children, and to provide an opportunity for children and youth to lead worship.

#### **7. Children as change agents**

The Assembly acknowledged that children can be positive agents of change. Therefore it appealed to the AACC member churches to view children with respect and to design church programmes with children in order to set a positive example for all programmes with children in the community.

#### **8. Harmful practices**

The Assembly noted that harmful practices include, amongst others, female genital mutilation, early marriages, child labour, infanticide, incest, maltreatment of children with disabilities, and pornography, including negative media influence, and resolved that these be strongly condemned. The Assembly proposed that the AACC and its member churches utilise every opportunity to advocate for an end to all practices that negatively affect children.

#### **9. Vulnerable children**

The AACC noted that all children are vulnerable and that many children live in environments of extreme vulnerability. Vulnerable children include orphans, sexually abused children, trafficked children, street children, children influenced by witchcraft, children living in child-headed households, children involved in conflict and children affected and infected with HIV/Aids. Member churches of the AACC are challenged to discern how and where they should respond to the causes of child vulnerability in their areas. Plans for mitigating the causes of child vulnerability should be implemented and reported on at the next General Assembly.

#### **10. Audit of child vulnerability**

The Assembly proposed that the AACC commission an audit of child vulnerability in five countries, examining its causes and developing strategies for reducing risk and building resilience. The audit report should be presented at the next AACC General Assembly in 2013.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This opportunity opened the door for further interaction between the Southern African Network to End Corporal and Humiliating Punishment of Children and the AACC member churches, as well as the National Councils of Churches. Specific issues and opportunities for cooperation may be found in the sharing of resource materials on parental education, children's rights, the Day of the African Child and the proposed audit of the causes of children's vulnerability. Perhaps the greatest and most exciting possibilities lie in plotting a "way forward" over the next five years, especially in advocacy activities aimed specifically at outlawing corporal and humiliating punishment of children in Africa. This should

be done together with the churches as a major stakeholder able to influence thought and practice in faith and cultural communities on the continent. ●

- The participation of Keith Vermeulen and Carol Bower as resource persons from SANECHP at the AACC's ninth General Assembly was made possible through funding received from Save the Children Sweden that included sponsorship of the "Children's Track" tea table. Keith represents the South African Council of Churches - a member of SANECHP - which in turn is a member of the AACC.