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**International Rural Churches Association
Voice to the Voiceless**

STATEMENT OF 2014 IRCA
5TH QUADRENNIAL CONFERENCE
HELD IN LILONGWE, MALAWI
July 28 – August 1, 2014

THEME: HOLDING ON TO HOPE

*Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope.
My comfort in my suffering is this: your promise preserves my life. (Psalm 119:49-50)*

We, the seventy-two members of the International Rural Churches Association who have been meeting in the African Bible College Lilongwe, Malawi, for the 5th International Rural Churches Association conference from July 28 to August 1, have this message to share with our Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world, our rural colleagues and with the leaders of national and international church organizations. We have been 44 from Malawi, mostly from rural congregations, and 28 international participants from eight countries around the world (India, Romania, Korea, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, UK, US), gathered to explore the theme, Holding on to Hope. For us all, whether local or visitors, it has proven to be an unforgettable experience. For us Malawians to meet and talk with rural Christians from other parts of the world, and likewise for us internationals to learn from such a significant number of Malawians, from all regions of this country, is an amazing opportunity for practical and spiritual enrichment. In worship, in music, in Bible studies, discussions and times of fellowship, we have shared deeply, in a great variety of accents, perspectives and experiences, everyone contributing something different, and yet we have been very aware of our commonality as rural people.

This was the first conference of IRCA held in an African context. In meeting here, rural church people from Malawi were able to share with brothers and sisters the difficult situations under which they minister, the deep poverty of this mainly rural country, the difficulty of communication and travel, the high rates of illiteracy, and sicknesses caused by lack of potable water and sanitation facilities. At the same time we shared similar concerns of rural communities around the world caused by the uncertainties for farmers caused by weather, low commodity prices and high production costs, by governments' lack of concern and poor services.

The hope, which came from the love and support experienced through this community, strengthened IRCA's belief in networking. It encourages us to continue

our journey as the people of God, though we know the road will be dusty and full of potholes.

This was also the first conference with a youth caucus. Four international youth and seven youth from Malawi shared activities and fellowship parallel to the conference time, while exploring issues that face the youth of the world (like HIV/AIDS, leadership, drug and alcohol abuse, financial independence) and ways of approaching them from a faith perspective.

From the conference we bring back to our churches, communities, countries some learnings:

1. Commonality of Rural People around the world and our problems.
2. Decisions that affect our lives (e.g. by governments) are made far away from the rural context. Unfortunately, decisions that affect our churches face the same problem (church national offices); ultimately we as rural people have to depend on ourselves and on God.
3. Therefore, we realize the importance of ecumenical connectedness.
4. We will continue to explore fresh ways churches can stimulate community development when resources are slim.
5. We recognize the need to develop leaders, both lay and ordained, to increase the effectiveness of the Christian presence in rural areas.
6. We commit ourselves to sharing resources with each other, as we develop and maintain a worldwide rural network for a holistic ministry, in order to embrace rural hope.
7. We challenge ourselves to take risks to further God's Kingdom.

The Association reaffirms its solidarity with rural communities which are vulnerable due to both man-made and natural disasters. The rural areas need a voice. We in IRCA realize strongly the role, given by God, to be a voice for and to the voiceless, and to actively raise the profile of the challenges of rural ministry.

IRCA LEADERSHIP TEAM

August 1, 2014

Jerry Marshall – Chairperson (Director, Arthur Rank Centre, UK)

Catherine Christie – Past Chairperson (United Church of Canada Overseas Personnel Korea, clergy)

Eric Skillings – Secretary (United Church of Canada, clergy)

Garry Hardingham – Treasurer and Past Secretary (Uniting Church in Australia North Queensland Presbyterian Minister and Chairperson, clergy)

Kevin Harper – Past Treasurer (Uniting Church in Australia, farmer)

Lothar Schullerus – Representative for IRCA Europe (Protestant Church Switzerland, clergy)

Robyn McPhail – Representative for IRCA Oceania (Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, clergy)

Prasad Rao – Representative for IRCA Asia (Church of South India, bishop Rayalaseema Diocese)

Copeland Nkhata – Representative for IRCA Malawi (Malawi United Methodist Church, clergy)

Dave Ruesink – Representative for IRCA America (Presbyterian Church USA, emeritus professor)