



LIBERATED
BY GOD'S
GRACE

TWELFTH ASSEMBLY
THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION
2017 - WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA

STUDY BOOK

LWF Twelfth Assembly,
Windhoek, Namibia, 10–16 May 2017

Study Book



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Introduction

The Twelfth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation will gather in Windhoek, Namibia, 10–16 May 2017. Coming together as a global communion of Lutheran churches 500 years after the beginning of the Reformation, we will have a lot to share with one another. We will celebrate and live out our communion in worship and prayer, joint discussions, and discernment. The LWF’s vision statement, “Liberated by God’s grace, a communion in Christ living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world,” is reflected in the Assembly’s main theme, “Liberated by God’s Grace.” What are we liberated from? What are we liberated to? What practices and concepts stand in the way of the gospels’ liberating message? These are just some of the questions that we will reflect on during this Assembly.

This study book provides a summary of the Assembly preparatory material and the discussions that took place at the regional pre-assemblies. It creates a shared basis for all participants and helps them to prepare for deliberations on the Assembly themes by providing a point of departure for plenaries and, in particular, the village groups. It follows the thematic flow of the Assembly, starting with “Liberating Grace: the Gift We Receive,” moving into the three subthemes, “Salvation—Not for Sale,” “Human Beings—Not for Sale,” and “Creation—Not for Sale,” and ending with “Liberating Grace: the Call We Share.” The main theme, “Liberated by God’s Grace,” provides a general framework for the Assembly, while the subthemes concentrate on specific issues. The three chapters exploring the subthemes start with a description of the context, followed by a brief theological reflections and end with a section on “seeds of hope,” where positive

developments are identified. The appendices include the messages from the regional pre-assemblies; the Statement on Mission to the Twelfth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation; the LWF Statement on the Church in the Public Space, which was received by the LWF Council in 2016; an abstract of the study document “The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion,” the study document that was received by the LWF Council in 2015.

You are invited to read the study book and reflect on the issues raised, paying attention to questions of particular relevance in your own context. The village groups serve as a space where different contextual insights and theological reflections on these topics will be discussed. The following three questions will provide the framework for the discussions:

- What captured your attention in relation to the theme of the day in the plenary?
- To what kind of witness do these issues call us today as a global communion of churches?
- What would we want to convey to our constituencies back home in view of what was discussed today?

May God’s Spirit inspire our encounters and common journey.

Rev. Dr Martin Junge, General Secretary



Liberating Grace: The Gift We Receive

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Eph 2:8).

Introduction

“Liberated by God’s Grace” is the Lutheran World Federation’s main theme for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. The Lutheran concept of liberation and freedom is closely linked to the doctrine of justification by faith through grace. According to the Lutheran tradition, this doctrine has also been called “the doctrine by which the church stands or falls.” It affirms that in Christ God’s love is given to us as a free and unconditional gift. The experience of forgiveness, of God’s grace, and God’s unconditional love frees us from fear, and allows us to express our gratitude through the loving and caring engagement with human beings and the whole of creation. This understanding of liberating grace—as relevant today as it was in Luther’s times—continues to influence all aspects of theology. At this Assembly, we will reflect on how the message of God’s liberating grace speaks to us today, 500 years after the beginning of the Reformation.

As we commemorate this 500th Anniversary, we should bear in mind that the Reformation can be understood as a liberation movement, a dramatic call not to conform to the standards of

this world, and the liberation of the individual, the church, and society from corrupt ideologies of religious and social exclusion. The Apostle Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). During this Assembly, we are invited to reflect on the idols and ideologies that hold human beings captive. The three subthemes of the Assembly, “Salvation—Not for Sale,” “Human Beings—Not for Sale,” and “Creation—Not for Sale,” will help us to identify and question practices and theological concepts that stand in the way of the gospel’s liberating message and serve as “yokes of slavery,” not only with regard to human beings but also the whole of God’s creation.

Context

The message “liberated by God grace” reaches us at a time when the concept of “freedom” is increasingly put in question. This has several reasons, some of which have to do with current social and economic developments. In many contexts, we experience merciless competition, supported by a neoliberal market economy, whose aim is sheer economic growth. In this context, attention to social relationships, concern for the well-being of all creation, compassion, and goodness tend to disappear, and the “survival of the fittest” becomes the normative ideal. When wealth production becomes the highest good, human beings and all of creation are commodified and reduced to a means to an economic end. In light of this increasing commodification of life, people in countries that have recently gained

their freedom, either from totalitarian or colonial oppression, have started to ask, Is this the freedom we longed for? In many countries, a justifiable suspicion of economic liberalism has started to threaten political liberalism. When too much trust is placed in the market while, at the same time, ecological health, social justice, and employment conditions are being neglected, people start to search for political alternatives. However, when political parties, espousing liberal market ideologies, also promote basic democratic freedoms, populists tend to equate the deteriorating social conditions with the promotion of democratic rights. Populist movements such as these tend to seek “strong leaders” who will promise to take action against the liberal “élites.” The first step in many populist agendas is to identify the “other” who can be blamed for the problems plaguing society—in most cases this would be immigrants or minorities. Egocentric, nationalistic, autocratic, protectionist, and isolationist concepts are proposed as easy remedies for the ills of the excessive and uncontrolled globalization of market forces. The current shift toward a rigid nationalism is not limited to Europe or the USA. Out of fear or anxiety, people tend to sanction strong-handed policies, which often end up threatening the freedom of speech, limiting the freedom of the press, or violating human rights.

In addition to economic and political philosophies, certain theologies are damaging to the notion of freedom. They either manipulate the message of God’s free gift of grace by making it dependent on actions, or curtail freedom by burdening it with legalistic provisions. This kind of theology exploits people’s fear of failure. Instead of liberating them, these theologies create new bondages, contrary to what we read in 1 John 4:18,

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

It is helpful to remember that the Reformation did not just revolutionize the personal relationship between the individual and God. Rather, it challenged an entire sociopolitical and religious system of domination and exploitation, in which a religion, based on fear of eternal punishment in purgatory, went hand in hand with a rigid strategy of commercializing the grace of God through a system of selling indulgences. In addition, there was systemic and widespread corruption within both the clergy and the feudal authorities.

It is time to claim and reclaim the concept of grace. People and societies that have stopped hearing about grace and mercy run the risk of acquiescing to oppressive economic, political, and spiritual ideologies, and thereby losing the very bases for preserving true dignity and freedom.

God’s grace as a gift

Luther’s concept of Christian freedom is closely linked to his understanding of grace. This is the red thread that runs through Luther’s works from the beginning of the Reformation until his death in 1546. Throughout his life, Luther struggled with the question, How do I find a gracious God? Before his reformatory discovery, his main concern was to discover what he needed to do in the midst of all the prescriptions, rules, rituals, and moral commandments in order to become a good Christian, and to have a right relationship with God. Here freedom appears as an anthropological constant or natural ability. Human beings are not only responsible for their success in everyday life but, eventually, also able to achieve their salvation. This understanding of human freedom seems to resonate well with the approach of the popular self-help books that promise to help us to achieve success, happiness, and self-fulfillment by correctly applying our will.

In strict theological terms freedom is God's prerogative. Human freedom is therefore not a product of the human being's own capacity but the unconditional gift of the gospel, which is God's proclamation of love to human beings. In the 28th Thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther states that this "love of God does not find, but creates that which is pleasing to it."¹ This means that God's unconditional love and grace justify the sinner who receives this gift by faith and not through deeds. Human beings are God's beloved children, not because of who they are and what they do but because of who God is and what God does. God's righteousness is graciously given to us. That Divine initiative frees us from our fear of falling short and our bondage to justify ourselves.

In the foreword to the Latin edition of his works, Luther describes how he came to understand the meaning of God's righteousness, a notion which, in his own words, he had "hated so much." This happened after he had meditated on Romans 1:17 ("For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'"). Luther says:

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: "The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The just person lives by faith.'" I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The just person lives by faith." All at once I felt that I was born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light.²

While during the Reformation people felt the strong need to become righteous before God, today human beings increasingly feel the need to justify themselves before their fellow human beings. In many societies, there is immense pressure to be successful and to correspond to the requirements of a certain social status, or the pressure to act in accordance with certain role models. Social media networks often contribute to this pressure. Social approbation becomes the source of dignity for human beings. This then frequently leads to the question, How do I find a gracious neighbor? instead of, How do I find a gracious God? The desire to be accepted and dignified is no less strong today than it was during Luther's time. And here the doctrine of justification continues to have meaning for us today. Grace continues to liberate us, to provide relief from fear, and to give us the courage to embrace true freedom. This doctrine can draw our attention to the ways in which God affirms us unconditionally. Filled with fear, Luther had sought a gracious God and had wrestled long and hard with the question how to find this God. The answer that ultimately emerged is simple and continues to be relevant today: "we do not need to find this God—we already have this God."³

Regarding the concept of freedom, it must be acknowledged that Luther and Lutheranism in general have sometimes been accused of interpreting the gift of grace in a way that undermines the relevance of good deeds. If, by grace, human beings are free from the idea that our works merit our salvation, what then is the point of doing good? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran theologian who paid with his life for his resistance against the Nazis during World War II, referred to this misinterpretation as "cheap grace":

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance,

baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.⁴

Bonhoeffer knew that freedom without responsibility was an example of cheap grace. He shared Luther's understanding that grace leads to responsible freedom. True freedom is never self-centered.

Christian freedom

Through God's liberating grace human beings are made truly free and through being freed from being *incurvatus in se ipse*, turned into themselves, they are free to turn their eyes from themselves to God and their neighbor. In his treatise, "The Freedom of a Christian," Luther juxtaposes his two famous theses: "A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything" and "A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all."⁵ For Luther, freedom, which is a gift from God, is never self-fulfilling. On the contrary, freedom finds its fullest expression in freely entering into life-giving relationships with God and our neighbor. This understanding of freedom inspired Luther's understanding of vocation. In his doctrine of "the three estates," Luther affirmed that every kind of work within the church, the family, as well as occupations in the civic or social realm, could be a holy instance of loving service to one's neighbor. Every person is free to understand their life's work as a calling in which they can communicate God's love. This perception laid a foundation for later concepts of active citizenship. Christian freedom was personal, but never private. Freedom was a calling to public service. According to Luther, God has called the church to be a "living word" in the world. To be a "living word" in the world also means to be committed to diaconal service, raising one's voice, and taking

action against the oppression of the poor, the persecuted, and the marginalized.

The gospel's liberating message emphasizes the equal dignity of all human beings, women and men. Writing about the *LWF Gender Justice Policy*, a Lutheran pastor from Malaysia, Au Sze Ngui, says:

Liberation from the bondage of sin is the beginning of our striving for justice: we are free; we are forgiven; we are the recipients of God's grace. We are free to change and to change the world. There are many examples of how Christianity has been an agent of change by supporting the revision of some "traditional" practices.⁶

The LWF Global Young Reformers Network invited young people from around the world to reflect on the question of what their faith has freed them from and freed them to. Darius Lee, a LWF Global Young Reformers Network's representative from Singapore, describes how his faith has freed him from perfection and fear:

Children and teenagers in Singapore are expected to meet high standards in the pursuit of excellence. As a young person, I struggled with various issues of fear and self-worth. The breakthrough came when the Lord spoke to me through Psalm 139, where the psalmist spoke of how God created his inmost being, and knit him together in his mother's womb. Knowing that God valued me and had a plan for me, even at conception, I knew that I had no reason to fear. As the psalmist writes, I praise God because "I am fearfully and wonderfully made"!

Carolina Huth from the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Argentina recounts how she has been freed to create new spaces:

As Lutherans we believe that while traditions are not necessary for salvation, they are sometimes good for order, tranquility, and common practice. But when they do not serve

their purpose, when people are uncomfortable and the church is no longer inviting and God's message does not reach everyone, then we may need to consider reorganizing the pews.⁷

What are we liberated from and what we are liberated to by God's grace—as individuals, as churches, as a global communion? As churches in ongoing reformation, we are invited to ponder these questions anew in every generation in all our different contexts.

Word of God and critical discernment

Luther's theological convictions were based on his profound and intense engagement with Scripture. Luther's main hermeneutical has its origin in the doctrine of justification as the core of the gospel. The interpretation of the manifold texts in the Bible, then, derive from and are based on this core insight. According to Luther, the real meaning of the Bible in any of its parts is "what promotes Christ." Luther believed that Holy Scripture derives its authority from its content, which can be summarized in Jesus Christ who is, as the Gospel of John affirms, the Word of God made flesh.⁸ Therefore, the Bible derives its authority from the way in which it reveals God's Word to us, as the manger that provided shelter for the Christ child so that the shepherds could see. Luther wrote that we should,

think of the scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies.⁹

Maintaining this interpretive relationship between Scripture and Christ, *sola scriptura* and *solus Christus*, guards against literalistic

and fundamentalist interpretations of Scripture. In the same way, a *solus Christus* that is not informed by *sola Scriptura* will end up drawing the Christ we want for us, not the one God sent to us. The principle of the "self-authentication" or, in theological language, "autopisty" of the Holy Scripture, has also been criticized for opening the door to arbitrariness. The reformers were however very concerned about avoiding an arbitrary interpretation of the Bible. They always insisted that it is crucial that people are educated and trained to understand the Holy Scripture. It is not by accident that Lutheran churches have traditionally paid serious attention to research on biblical exegesis and that the importance of general education for all, literacy, and the development of the vernacular gained special relevance in this context.

Luther pleaded for both Christian education and general education for all so that everybody could develop the skills and competence that equip them for their civil and professional lives and to exercise their Christian freedom. In the "Large Catechism," Luther states,

If we want capable and qualified people for both the civil and the spiritual realms, we really must spare no effort, time, and expense in teaching and educating our children to serve God and the world.¹⁰

Interestingly, this fervent plea comes at the end of the explanation of the fourth commandment, "You are to honor your father and your mother." For Luther, this commandment was not only about what children owe their parents, but also about what parents owe their children.

In his treatise "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" of 1524, Luther explains that the secular government must be responsible for maintaining schools.

It is a grave and important matter, and one which is of vital concern both to Christ and the world at large, that we take steps to help the youth.... My dear sirs, if we have to spend such large sums every year on guns, temporal peace and prosperity of a city, why should not much more be devoted to the poor neglected youth – at least enough to engage one or two competent people to teach school?¹¹

Particularly in his “Sermon On Keeping Children in School,” Luther argues against the pragmatism of parents who take their children out of school, “turning them to the making of a living and to caring for their bellies.”¹²

For Luther, the purpose of education should not be to “care for one’s belly”—the point of education must be to care for children’s souls, and ultimately for their salvation. Throughout the letter, Luther opposes education for the pursuit of Mammon. According to him, education is not a means to an economic end, and its value should not be commodified. For Luther, the relevance of education was closely connected to serving both God and the neighbor. Education was a tool for liberating the child to enter into loving service for the sake of the world.

Today education systems are increasingly becoming pragmatic and market-oriented with the aim to train an “effective” human being who can contribute to the material growth of society. Education itself is being instrumentalized for economic purposes. But Luther affirmed that children and their education, like all of God’s creatures, should not be in bondage to economic ends. Luther’s emphasis on the liberating purpose of learning and studying not just for “one’s belly” but “for one’s soul” might provide some relevant reflection and remind us of the importance of critical discernment in times of post-truth.

Communion as a gift

God’s grace does not only liberate individuals but it also frees churches not to be “turned into themselves.” We are gathered at this Assembly as a global Lutheran communion. The history of the Lutheran communion has not been a history of exclusion and separation, but a history of growing closer together. 1947, when the LWF was founded, as well as 1990, when the self-understanding of the LWF as a communion of churches was declared at the LWF Assembly in Curitiba, are just two of the landmarks on this way.

Being a communion is a gift to the church. The concept of “communion” is based on the biblical notion of *koinonia*, and belongs to the heritage of all churches. The New Testament concept of communion/*koinonia* points to the significance of the “communion of saints” as the communion of believers who share Word and sacrament, worship and prayer, and the gifts of God (Acts 2:43–47).

Paul’s notion of *koinonia* demonstrates the formation of a body of relationships based on the invitation of the gospel and the fellowship at the table. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 1 Corinthians 11:23–25, the body and blood of Jesus Christ in and through the wine and bread of the sacrament become foundational in demonstrating and strengthening *koinonia*. People of different backgrounds eating together meant participation in Jesus Christ and implied new relationships with one another. This breaking down of ethnic boundaries that would have naturally stood between the different members of the *koinonia* is shown in the way in which Paul confronts Peter’s party for discriminating against the Gentiles (Gal 2). In Acts, the Hebrew and Hellenistic fellowship “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship [*koinonia*], to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The notion of altar and pulpit fellowship within the LWF as a

communion of churches comes from this basic criterion of apostolic tradition, mutual learning, and sharing in the sacraments. Communion with Christ comes about through the preaching of the gospel, which awakens and is embraced by faith, and through the sacraments that strengthen and are received by faith.

This communion with Christ through faith and participation in his saving work implies deep love for and solidarity with one another. Our communion can live into Luther's call to freedom as being mutually bound in loving service. This freedom to love one another is the heart of Luther's understanding of the Church as a communion of saints and a sacramental communion. In his 1519 "Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and Concerning the Brotherhoods," Luther wrote about the mutuality that exists among all who share in one communion. Just as Christ's love is communicated to those who participate in the communion,

through this same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own, take upon ourselves their form and their necessity and make theirs all the good that is within our power, that they may enjoy it. That is a real fellowship, and that is the true significance of this sacrament. In this way we are changed into one another and are brought into fellowship with one another by love, without which there can be no such change.¹³

The communion is lived out not [in] a coerced and prescribed uniformity. The basic understanding of the Church as communion includes the idea that unity exists among differences. One phrase that has become a hallmark of Lutheran ecclesiology is "unity in reconciled diversity." This echoes the understanding that the one gospel expresses itself in different voices. Reconciling diversity

becomes a hallmark of Christian *koinonia*, as it reflects God's liberating and reconciling purpose in Christ Jesus. It calls us to carry each other's burdens and have patience with one another. Luther says in one of his famous Invocavit-sermons:

So we should also deal with our brother, have patience with him for a time, have patience with his weakness and help him bear it; [...] and thus we do not travel heavenward alone, but bring our brethren, who are not now our friends, with us.¹⁴

Communion comes alive only when it is an experienced reality. It has a variety of dimensions, including worship, *diakonia*, and discipleship. When we are able to realize that the liberating gift of God's grace is at work through our communion, Luther says,

then will the fellowship be complete and justice be done to the sacrament. For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that they are made one with all others.¹⁵

Gathered at this Assembly, we cherish the gift of communion that our churches have received and explore together, how to live out the vision of the LWF as being "Liberated by God's grace, a communion in Christ living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world."¹⁶



Salvation —Not for Sale

For Lutherans, salvation envisages the restored communion between God and God’s creation. When we talk about salvation we do not imagine an abstract condition. Rather, we point to the living and life-giving relationship between God and God’s creation. From a Lutheran perspective, salvation is God’s initiative that finds its response in faith—a relationship of trust. God’s salvific action in this world has many dimensions and can best be described in verbs with God as the subject: God redeems; liberates; heals; transforms; uplifts; empowers; reconciles. For Lutherans, the most prominent verb has been justify; God justifies. As Christians, we experience the Triune God sharing God’s abundant love and overcoming the destructive powers of sin and death. The power of the gospel provides the fundamental orientation for our lives, so that we live as children of God in community with God and with others.

The message of justification is the theological expression of the unconditional acceptance of all human beings by the grace of God. Its origin is missional; its goal ecumenical. It has social consequences regarding the inclusive nature of the body of Christ, and it is the basis for a new life shaped by the love of God and love of neighbor.¹⁷

Context

In reflecting on salvation vis-à-vis economic, political, cultural, and ideological power dynamics today, Christians recognize a number of challenges, both from within and without. As we assess our contemporary situation, four major challenges stand out:

- Temptations of prosperity
- Political power aspirations
- A climate of fear and the dwindling plausibility of faith
- Ideological distortions of faith.

Temptations of prosperity

From Luther’s perspective, the practice of indulgences was a disastrous deformation of faith. It turned salvation into a commodity, suggesting that God’s grace could be traded for money. Today, there are several ways in which faith and religion have become a business. The notions of profit and price-and-performance ratio are being introduced into spiritual life. Prosperity has become a catchword that distorts the biblical notion of blessing. Instead of acknowledging God’s pivotal agency in matters of salvation, human beings act as promoters of their own salvation—either in anxious lust for salvation, or in proud self-assertion.

There are influential preachers of the “prosperity” gospel that argue that if someone has not yet received healing or wealth, the person’s faith has not yet been strong enough, or the person has not believed in the “right way.” In many parts of the world, new churches that promote the prosperity gospel are emerging, but the teaching also spreads within existing churches. A number of preachers serve their own interests, doing spiritual damage to their followers and exploiting them materially. To whom are these people accountable for what they preach and do? Throughout the history of the church, theology has played a crucial role in holding preachers accountable to God and to the wider church for the messages that the preachers send out.

For Luther, the way to overcome bad ecclesial practices was good theology.

In light of today's growing consumerism, the market logic has invaded the realm of faith. Marketing language and strategies have replaced religious messaging. When the crucial question seems to be how attractive or appealing a faith message is then quick satisfaction and problem solving sell best. The depth of the faith tradition and the existential involvement in the complexities of life in light of God, as we see it for example in the book of Job, seem a far reach.

Many stories in the Bible portray the significance of struggling with God as one of the characteristics of faith. Jacob's struggle at Jabbok (Gen 32:23–33) is one example. Here Jacob walks away blessed, but limping. Hannah's struggle with God is symbolized in the struggle with her bareness. When she, by God's grace, bears a child, she is filled with joy and does not need to consider the child her possession, but can free the child to serve God (1 Sam 1–2).

Today, people long for a holistic blessing with physical and spiritual dimensions. How can the church encourage and accompany people in their pursuit of that deep longing for living water? In the encounter with Jesus, the woman of Samaria understood that there is a difference between water that makes us thirst for more, and the living water that becomes a fountain of life envisaging life eternal (Jn 4). In view of the temptations of prosperity, the church is called to engage with the deep longing of people for blessing and wholeness.

Political power aspirations

Apart from economic prosperity and consumer satisfaction, aspiring to political power is the other significant temptation that can distort the understanding of salvation. This is a perennial issue as the story of Satan's interaction with Jesus shows. In this text, spiritual

hubris and the aspiration to political power are presented as a temptation (Mt 4:1–11).

For the sake of salvation, and the well-being of all, it is essential to distinguish between the realms of spiritual and worldly power. In different contexts, religion, religious actors and religious narratives are being instrumentalized by certain groups. Political leaders can be the drivers behind this tendency, but some religious leaders actively collaborate in political matters in ways that undermine their own credibility.

There are many examples of how churches have endorsed political agendas that are deeply opposed to the gospel. Churches have supported nationalism and slavery, blessed guns for wars, and tolerated harmful traditions that violate the bodies of children, women and men.

In a number of countries across the globe, the preferential treatment of one religious community by the state poses serious problems in terms of justice and peace in society. This injustice is exacerbated by identity politics, economic injustice, and socio-political disintegration. Within the global Lutheran communion, we actually know such experiences from both sides: contexts in which Lutheran churches have enjoyed privileges, and contexts in which Lutheran churches have suffered discrimination.

The Lutheran communion has deeply reflected on these experiences. As a result, a broad consensus has emerged within the communion that, on the basis of Luther's call appropriately to distinguish between the temporal and spiritual authorities, Lutherans today advocate for freedom of religion or belief and, consequently, for the equal treatment of religious communities by state authorities. Lutherans focus their attention on establishing effective legislation that ensures freedom and equality with regard to the fundamental rights of all citizens. Although there is a broad consensus at the conceptual level, the practical implications are somewhat more

demanding. Challenges include human rights advocacy; advocacy for churches and other religious communities that suffer discrimination; and the commitment to strengthen the acceptance among citizens that all citizens, regardless of their faith, enjoy the same fundamental rights.

A climate of fear and the dwindling plausibility of faith

Today, fear seems to be a pervasive, invisible dominating power governing the lives of many people. They feel that they have lost or will soon lose control over certain aspects of their lives. Technological progress has enabled humanity to contain the negative effects of many diseases and to produce more food than ever before, yet threats to life seem to increase since fundamental questions of justice and peace are not being addressed. While, until recently, natural disasters have been the main cause of loss of life, today armed conflict, i.e., human-driven disasters, have become the principal threat to human existence.

In light of the fact that many people today are anxious about the state of the world, “security” appears to have become the new synonym for salvation. Protectionism and polarization, resulting from new regulations and policies as well as mental and physical walls, divide people. The immediate question is whether fortified national security concepts will bring about human security.

The more fundamental question is how human agency can be constructively restored. Primarily this is a question of political procedures and the interaction in the public space, but it is also one regarding the wider horizon in which we see our lives embedded, i.e., of spirituality and faith.

For a number of people, faith is no longer a plausible or relevant perspective for their lives. It does not convince or compel them to believe in God. Their orientation in life is inner-worldly, shaped by culture, science, and rationality. They perceive religious traditions as forces that enslave

people, or as being part of the establishment. They argue that in order to be truly human these traditions need to be challenged, and that true emancipation and liberation mean first of all emancipation from religious institutions.

In several countries, the church’s influence on people’s everyday lives and public life in society has decreased. This is not only due to an aggressive atheism and active opposition to the Christian faith, but also because people are losing their connection to the faith community. Increasing numbers of Christians are religiously illiterate and unfamiliar with biblical texts and religious practices; this weakens the vitality of the Christian witness.

Critical perspectives do not only target religious but also other institutions in society. Life appears to be driven by individual aspirations or social movements rather than institutions. This is related to changes in the ways in which we communicate through social media. Linear ways of sharing religious teaching and practice, for example through traditional authorities such as parents, educators and clergy, are becoming less influential while other platforms and spaces, including social media, websites and peer groups, are gaining in importance.

Sometimes habits and practices in the church itself create a difficult environment. Church life might be organized in such a way that it only speaks to a specific group or generation. We need to recognize that speaking to people and building community with people from very diverse backgrounds and biographical experiences constitutes a complex challenge.

Dwindling credibility can strike at the very heart of the Christian faith. The message of God’s unconditional grace does not resonate with today’s economic worldview since it is so very different from what many people experience day to day. As during the Apostle Paul’s time, so today the crucified Christ is experienced as a stumbling block and regarded as foolishness

(1 Cor 1:23). Just like in Jesus' time, the living voice of the gospel seems not only to fall on good soil, but also on rocky land or between thorns. Therefore it cannot grow (Mk 4:3–9).

Ideological distortions of faith

Since faith seems to be fragile, there is the temptation to fortify religion in an attempt to immunize it against all external or internal challenges. This attempt turns salvation into an ideology that produces closed mindsets and often goes hand in hand with fundamentalist approaches to the Holy Scripture.

Certain movements claim to protect the Christian tradition and assert themselves as defenders of Christian values. They “worship” their own understanding of the Christian tradition and shut themselves off from the lively conversation within the Christian community about what it means to live as a Christian today. They regard Christianity as being embodied first and foremost in a certain civilization or moral universe. The living voice of the gospel is suffocated because such movements isolate themselves from the dialogue with others within or outside the Christian community. This isolation negates the gospel's incarnational dynamic that enters into people's lives and dialogically engages with them. Some people imagine that there was a “golden age” of Christianity, when Christendom seemed to be in full bloom, unfolding its formative power in all spheres of society. Such images often become more of a hindrance than a help as we seek confidently to engage with today's realities.

When identity politics based on ethnic or religious belonging play a powerful role, faith can become captive to these dynamics and fuel the inimical structures and adversarial habits of different groups in society. While for Lutherans faith should be key to defining who we are as persons, faith is holistic but not totalitarian, and Lutherans must resist the instrumentalization of faith for a particular interest. There is a clear consensus in the Lutheran

communion that violence in the name of religion, be it physical or psychological, is contrary to the gospel.

Theological reflection

To be touched by the message of salvation is a transformative experience. When the Bible tells stories, offers prayers and provides theological reflection about faith, it conveys a message of great joy, of empowering steadfastness and deep relationality. The following theological reflection will delve into the following three dimensions of faith in the Triune God:

- The heart “goes leaping and dancing for the great pleasure it has found in God”
- The priesthood of all baptized
- The Bible in the life of the Lutheran communion.

The heart “goes leaping and dancing for the great pleasure it has found in God”

When we experience that God turns God's face to us, this process of recognition deeply touches our hearts and souls. Mary's Magnificat is a powerful reminder of how recognition transforms lives: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant” (Lk 1:46–48). In his theological exploration of the Magnificat, Martin Luther unfolded the power of God's recognition in people's lives:

But where there is this experience, namely, that He is a God who looks into the depths and helps only the poor, despised, afflicted, miserable, forsaken, and those who are nothing, there a hearty love for Him is born. The heart overflows with gladness and goes leaping and dancing for the great pleasure it has found in God. There the Holy Spirit is present and has taught us in a moment such exceeding great knowledge and gladness through this experience.¹⁸

Mary is the paradigmatic human being who was touched and transformed by God's love. She is vulnerable and open, and through her relationship with God her life is filled with love and joy. Her agency is restored through this process of recognition. Luther dedicates his theological treatise about the Magnificat to the eighteen-year-old Duke John Frederick, Elector of Saxony, and recommends Mary as a model to John Frederick for his political authority and agency. Luther wanted to help this future political leader to understand that his life is embedded in and sustained by the recognition by God.

Here, again, it is appropriate to refer to Luther's two famous sentences from "The Freedom of a Christian":

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything.

A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.¹⁹

These two sentences express in a superb way how God's recognition sets us free from bondage and empowers us to loving service.

In "The Freedom of a Christian," Luther explores the meaning and impact of faith using love and joy as the two key terms that build and shape relationships:

From faith there flows a love and joy in the Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. We do not serve others with an eye toward making them obligated to us. Nor do we distinguish between friends and enemies, or anticipate their thankfulness or ingratitude. Rather, we freely and willingly spend ourselves and all that we have [...]. Knowing nothing except this sense of spontaneous joy, by which we do and suffer all things, we are led through Christ to delight in God, who lavishly dispenses all these gifts to us.²⁰

The priesthood of all baptized

The gift of baptism is the fundamental reference point for Christians in their understanding of salvation. Baptism testifies to the unconditional grace of God, the Creator of all, who works toward a new creation in the midst of this world. Those who are baptized are immersed in the radical love of God, who often shows steadfast love in surprising ways.

Luther joyfully declared that everyone who "comes out of the water of baptism"²¹ is in direct communion with God, and emphasized that every baptized person is called and empowered to participate in all aspects of church life.

Thus all of us who trust in Christ are priests and kings in Christ, as it says in 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."²²

To be a priest means to participate in the priesthood of Christ. This implies a twofold communication process: in prayer to bring people's concerns before God, and by sharing the gospel to bring God's concerns to others. With this notion of the priesthood of all the baptized, Luther challenged the division between clerics and the laity within the church. Redefining the priesthood implied redefining the office of the ordained. Pastors are to serve the church with their public office so that the priesthood of all the baptized can fully flourish.

On the basis of this, an understanding of the church is developed where the community's agency is strengthened through Word and sacrament, so that the life-giving dynamic of God's love can unfold far beyond the sanctuary. The Ethiopian theologian Yonas Yigezu explained this at an LWF consultation on ecclesiology:

[F]or Luther and the other Reformation theologians, the church is more than an institution in the world

in time and space. This necessitates the visible expression of the church through the community (congregation) both for confession and the practice of faith (mission). The essence of gathering around the Word and sacraments goes beyond what is performed in the sanctuary. These two essential ministries of the church are not an end in themselves, but a means to an end, which is God's mission. Gathering and dispersion (dismissal) belong together as far as mission is concerned. What the congregation does when it gathers in the sanctuary is a means toward what it does in the world when it is outside the sanctuary. Arguably, Luther did not often refer explicitly to mission. Nevertheless, his theology of love compellingly explicates the indispensability of Christian mission that seems to have radically shaped his view of the church. The church becomes a place where Christians are given a chance to exercise God-like love—the love of the cross.²³

In exercising this love as a community of equals through baptism, the church is also called prophetically to announce and practice inclusion, as we read in Galatians 3:27–28. Through baptism, both women and men are restored to God. Both are fully accepted by God although we are sinners at the same time. No one has any advantage before God as a result of gender. No one is justified before God due to what they have done or who they are, but by God's grace alone. The full and equal partnership between women and men is possible as is the breaking down of gender stereotypes that subordinate especially women, but also men, and violates their God-given integrity and dignity.²⁴

The Bible in the life of the Lutheran communion

In his pastoral and theological reflections, Martin Luther always sought faithfully to discern the Word of God from the Scriptures. Reading the Bible is one of the core activities of Christians around the world. It enables them to remember, proclaim, and practice the gospel message in ecclesial and societal life by being

in contact with its initial setting in the context of the Old and New Testament writings.

Over the last five years, the Lutheran communion engaged in a study process on hermeneutics in order to express Lutheran perspectives on reading and interpreting the Bible. The Lutheran tradition offers an important alternative to the screaming voices of fundamentalist perspectives and ideological distortions. The study document *In the Beginning was the Word. The Bible in the Life of the Lutheran Communion* outlines the Reformers' insights as follows:

(25) The reformers shared the conviction that the Bible reveals its truth by itself. The fact that we cannot understand the true meaning of the Bible by our own means and efforts, but have to receive it from outside by grace alone, is a hermeneutical consequence of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

(26) Yet, the Reformers insisted that it is important to train people to understand the Bible. Lutheran theologians have always emphasized the challenge of reading and interpreting the Bible. Not incidentally, research on biblical exegesis has been cultivated and elaborated in the Protestant churches.

(27) The tension between revelation and interpretation requires a specific ethos of reading. Luther spoke of prayer, meditation and personal struggle as the three rules guiding a correct and authentic reading of the Scripture.

(28) The plurality and multiformity of biblical voices render the task of understanding the Bible more difficult. Because of different perspectives in the Bible, some insist that it is necessary that a church authority decide on the right or wrong interpretation (this was the way in which Erasmus of Rotterdam for example argued against Luther). Luther, on the contrary, argued that in its very core, the gospel of justification by faith alone, the Bible is clear and unanimous and communicates the certainty of the truth of this gospel: 'The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic' (LW 33, 24). The interpretation of the manifold texts of the Bible, then, must derive from

and be based on this core insight. According to Luther, the real meaning of the Bible in any of its parts is ‘what bears Christ’ (cf. *LW* 35, 396).

(29) This hermeneutical rule, to display “what bears Christ,” implies the task of interpretation. The idea of “verbal inspiration” (every wording of the Bible is inspired and even directly dictated by God) is therefore not an adequate expression of Lutheran hermeneutics, although time and again it has been defended by Lutheran theologians.²⁵

Seeds of hope

While we acknowledge the challenges that have been mentioned, we also perceive seeds of hope that encourage us constructively to engage with matters of salvation:

- Sharing the gospel and building community
- Enabling transformative theological reflection
- Nurturing a culture of dialogue.

Sharing the gospel and building community

Critically aware of the fact that the church should not operate like a club but be a place where people from different socio-economic, ethnic, educational, and class backgrounds meet, numerous churches have started to rethink their way of organizing congregations, living in communion, and communicating the gospel. New youth and intergenerational initiatives have emerged that combine online and offline activities. There are creative missionary projects that share the joy of the gospel and empower people. There are welcoming congregations that intentionally give space to the marginalized and disempowered. There is pastoral care that accompanies people in difficult situations, and by listening to them enables them to find ways to move forward. In many churches there is new energy actively to form community and to nurture conviviality. People in these communities engage

with one another in holistic ways and connect spiritual life and diaconal solidarity.

The LWF mission conference in November 2016 provided a platform for sharing experiences with different forms of mission. As the concluding statement underlines,

The LWF reaffirms its understanding of participating in God’s mission holistically as encompassing proclamation, diakonia (which includes development) and advocacy.

This affirmation is elaborated in the document *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, which explains how God’s mission is the horizon against which the church’s mission activities take place:

This God in mission, who creates and sustains the universe and yet becomes vulnerable in and at the hands of God’s own creation, is a Triune God. Trinity describes “God in mission” as always a God for others; namely, the whole of humankind, the world, the entire creation. The Trinity is a communion in mission, empowering and accompanying the One who is sent, the beloved, to impact the world with transformation, reconciliation, and empowerment. For the ongoing mission of God, the Father and the Spirit send the Son, the Father and the Son breathe in the Spirit, and the Son and the Spirit reveal the glory of the Father to the far reaches of the universe. This sending, yet accompanying and empowering, of the beloved, this reaching out for others, and thus the acceptance of vulnerability in love, is characteristic of the Trinity. It is this love that unites the Triune God.²⁶

Enabling transformative theological reflection

Many people are acutely aware of the possible misuse of religion and faith and seek authentic and credible ways to live as people of faith. This recognition has led to new sensitivities

regarding how we think of religious authority, how we nurture religious communities, and how we engage in theological reflection.

The emergence of contextual theologies, liberation theologies, feminist theologies, eco-theologies, and post-colonial theologies in the twentieth century has provided vital insights. Many of these theological articulations have helped us to understand human life in more embodied and tangible ways. To receive and existentially to understand the gospel message is not an abstract cognitive process. Rather, it is a concrete, holistic process that restores the human person in the midst of a broken world, and includes the valuing and uplifting of the subdued elements of a person's identity, since they are not accidental but a significant aspect of embodied life. Often, those who are in a minority or being oppressed are more conscious of this than others. In view of pervasive racism, for example, black theology underlines that the acknowledgement of a black identity is vital. In light of the discrimination against indigenous people, indigenous theology advocates for the recognition of an indigenous identity.

Through in-depth theological engagement, the church has come to understand that intentionally welcoming people with different identities is of ecclesial relevance. This became obvious in light of the system of apartheid in South Africa. Most churches realized that apartheid betrayed the gospel and that therefore the churches that accepted apartheid, betrayed the ecclesial communion. Here, the close connection between anthropology and ecclesiology became apparent. In similar ways, feminist theology discloses the connection between oppressive and discriminatory gender relations and ecclesiology. A theological perspective that uses gender justice based on the notion of justification by faith will critically approach systems that are oriented by hierarchical and unjust structures, often up to the point of being sustained by unjust laws;

consequently, to live with the radical notion of being justified by God's grace is to be freed from meritocracy, or the fulfillment of the requirements of patriarchal traditions and values.

As these different engaged theologies interact with one another, the sensitivity to our different contexts emerges. This synergy exposes the need for critical reflection on one's own universalizing assumptions and context. Critical reflection reveals to us the need to overthrow certain dynamics of power and privilege. This, in turn, invites creativity which generates concrete action. Furthermore, interdisciplinary research has deepened theological engagement with today's worldly matters. The LWF international theology conference in November 2015 affirmed:

Transformative theology requires and enables looking with new eyes, truth-telling about the realities that we face. Seeing with new eyes is made possible by the communion and the differences within it; deep and trusting relationships within the communion enable us to see reality through others' eyes. This is precisely how a communion works and what communion is.²⁷

Nurturing a culture of dialogue

Fragmentation and polarization are pervasive negative developments within and between societies. In a world marked by division and strife, even among religious communities, dialogue has become crucial. Since its inception, the ecumenical movement has fostered dialogue processes between different churches. In 2017, the LWF marks fifty years of official bilateral dialogue with the Roman-Catholic Church. Furthermore, there is long-standing dialogue with the Anglicans, the Mennonites, the Orthodox, and the Reformed, as well as theological conversation with Pentecostal representatives. In such ecumenical dialogue, participants aim jointly to discern the truth of the gospel.

The dialogue processes also entail a critical reassessment of our divisive historical memories of the other in order to overcome divisions and strengthen the commitment to visible unity.

Since the 1970s, intentional encounters between people of different faiths have been organized in order to deepen mutual understanding and joint commitment, and to overcome suspicion, misunderstanding, and hate between different religious communities. Lutheran churches have been involved in building bridges between religious communities through interreligious dialogue and cooperation. One of the hallmarks of the LWF's approach to interreligious relations is to collaborate with interreligious partners in humanitarian and development work, while engaging in theological dialogue between religious leaders and scholars. In interreligious relations theological accountability is vital. In a shared world, religious communities have to explain why and how they engage with others, including secular actors, in the public space.

When outlining her vision of the church in the world, the young Brazilian theologian Eneida Jacobsen started off with an important question:

Do we want to be a church that tries to hide itself behind the ringing of its bells? Or are we to engage as part of Christ's body in the world in solidarity with victims of unjust political deliberations, exclusionary economic developments and harmful cultural and also religious dynamics? The church has a call to be there for others, to deeply care about God's creation and the well-being of all. [...] For me it is important to understand the public sphere as a communicative sphere. Only through dialogue—and here I mean the creative encounter between faith and reason, between faiths and between reasons—is it possible to establish an uninterrupted practice of discernment in the public discussion on the

best ways to respond to social and political challenges, towards the solution of common problems.²⁸

The LWF Council meeting in Wittenberg in June 2016 affirmed the call to public engagement, drawing our attention to the fact that the Bible calls us to be ready to respond to anyone who demands us to account for the hope that is within us and to do so with gentleness and reverence (1 Pet 3:15f.).

Baptism implies a vocation to a life in faith, hope and love (1 Cor 13:13), ready to care for the well-being of all. Christian communities have a public dimension, as they are called by God to be transformative agents in the world (Rom 12:2). Churches and congregations are called to move beyond their institutional comfort zone and prophetically to dwell amidst the cries and hopes that fill their local and global contexts. Thus, when churches isolate themselves from the broader concerns of their societies they betray their calling to be salt and light to the world (Mt 5:13–16).²⁹

The Reformation anniversary has become an important opportunity for the Lutheran churches more deeply to engage with the gospel message, and thus better to understand the life, death, and resurrection of Christ as God's engagement with the world. At a time when salvation, distorted by economic, political, cultural, or ideological forces, seems for sale, the gospel calls for critique and repentance. "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." This is the first of Luther's ninety-five theses, published on 31 October 1517. This call for repentance entails the message that the gospel radically opens new possibilities in life.³⁰ In Christ, we are no longer captive to our sins, but liberated to enjoy the communion with God and with one another.



Human Beings —Not for Sale

God created human beings in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27). As a result, every person has the same inherent dignity, regardless of gender, race, place of origin, or social status. This understanding is the basis for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Nonetheless, despite the universal acceptance of the principles of this declaration, the dignity of human beings is often violated or put in question.

The neoliberal market economy is based on the radical rupture between humanity and nature. This has tremendous consequences for human relations that are disturbed when human beings are transformed into commodities that serve economic ends. People are not important because they are human beings with dignity, but because they are consumers; their value is based on their ability to consume and to produce economic wealth. Theological language and understanding are required in order to critique and denounce the idolatrous nature of the logic of the market.

Context

As we assess our contemporary situation, the following challenges stand out with regard to Human Beings—Not for Sale:

- Work and (un)employment
- Debt
- Forced labor and human trafficking
- Refugees and migration
- Corruption and non-inclusion.

Work and (un)employment

In a neoliberal market economy, work is primarily understood as a contribution to the growth of the economy. Development is based on the monetization of time as more and more spheres of life are transformed by the production and consumption of marketable goods and services, including the social services. In Manchester, UK, for instance, a social worker is allocated fifteen minutes to support a frail or sick elderly person living alone in getting washed, dressed and fed in the morning, regardless of the complexity of the situation.³¹ When time is “monetized,” it reduces possibilities for building human relationships and increases loneliness, particularly in more individualistic societies.

An increasing number of large companies are moving their production to low-wage countries, where local workers are paid far less than there where the companies are located. Often local workers work under conditions amounting to modern slavery. Due to growing unemployment, people are nevertheless ready to accept work under any condition in order to meet their basic, everyday needs.

The neoliberal market society is driven by competition and the principle of “the survival of the fittest.” In Hong Kong for instance, dozens of secondary and university students, who succumbed to the high level of expectations in society, have committed suicide in the past few years. In many of our societies there is tremendous pressure to compete on the labor market. The principle of growth penetrates all

spheres of life. This is also reflected in the way we use language: we talk less and less about having a “rest,” but rather about having a “break” or a “day off.”³² “Having a break” is regarded as a means to increase one’s efficiency, not to cherish God’s creation and God’s Word. Inevitably, this pressure also negatively impacts the building and maintaining of human relationships and the interaction with family and friends.

At the same time, unemployment continues to be a huge challenge. In social welfare states, the unemployed who receive unemployment benefits are under increasing pressure to find employment at any cost. Unemployment affects a person’s self-esteem and can lead to depression, domestic violence, alcoholism, etc. Youth unemployment has assumed alarming proportions. Today’s young generation is likely to live under poorer conditions than their parents did. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that globally the unemployment rate among 15–24-year-olds will remain at approximately thirteen percent in 2017.³³ In some countries, youth unemployment has reached thirty to fifty percent (for instance, in late 2016, youth unemployment in Italy was 36 percent,³⁴ and in South Africa 54 percent).³⁵ As Bishop Horst Müller of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa noted at the LWF Africa pre-assembly:

more than forty percent of youth in the country [South Africa] will never have a job in their lifetime, which makes many of them harbor sentiments of worthlessness in a society that appears to not need or want them. As churches we must be able to affirm human dignity by showing that you are not valuable because you have a job, but we try to get you a job because you are valuable.³⁶

Debt

A market economy oriented toward growth depends on the ability to obtain credit, which

implies debt. Indebtedness affects individual, national, and global realities. Developments since the 2008 financial crisis have shown how the international economy reaches deeply into the everyday lives of people and communities. In many parts of the world, the enormous public debt is on the verge of exploding. Data reflecting private sector debts are no less impressive. According to the World Bank, in 2015 domestic credit to the private sector (% of GDP) reached 190.4 percent in North America; 153.2 percent in East Asia and the Pacific; 98.4 percent in the European Union; 56 percent in the Middle East and North Africa; 46 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa; and 49.7 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean.³⁷

Private household debt creates anxiety related to the need to repay the loans and forces people into new dependencies. Whereas a part of the private household debt is the result of increased consumerism, a growing percentage of private debt is incurred due to the need to satisfy basic everyday needs such as food, clothing, or repair or replacement of household items. It is often particularly difficult for poorer families to obtain an unsecured loan at a reasonable interest rate. Banks are unlikely to give loans to people at the margins and therefore the poorest people are forced to borrow money at very high rates of interest, or from lenders who specialize in small, unsecured loans. In these cases, interest rates are usually extremely high with some short-term lenders charging as much as 4,000 percent.³⁸ Banks and most short-term lenders know no grace; they are about profit. In the global South, many people who do not qualify for traditional banking credit become indebted to microcredit lenders in an attempt to alleviate poverty. They often find themselves in the complicated situation of being unable to repay the loan. In some cases, the selling of human organs is seen as a way to repay the loans.³⁹ In others, such as in India for example, farmers and peasants are committing suicide because of unbearable debt. Hukum

Sarki, an LWF staff member from Nepal who fights against Haliya (bonded labor system), described the fate of his father, who served as a Haliya laborer for twenty-four years:

He was not able to pay back the Rs 60 (56 US cents) that he had taken as a loan from local moneylender. Therefore, he was compelled to meet his fate as a tiller for the moneylender. This planted a seed of rebellion in my mind from early childhood.⁴⁰

Forced labor and human trafficking

In an attempt to escape extreme poverty, many people become victims of human trafficking. Human trafficking has reached proportions comparable to other illegal businesses such as drug trafficking. People are exploited in several ways, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, low wages, and inhuman working conditions. According to an ILO report, more than half of the victims of forced labor worldwide are women and girls, mainly in domestic work and forced sexual exploitation, while men and boys are primarily forced into economic exploitation in agriculture, construction, and mining.⁴¹ The ILO report estimates that there are currently approximately 21 million forced labor victims worldwide and USD 150 billion in illegal profits are made in the private sector each year through modern forms of slavery. Most countries worldwide are affected by human trafficking, either as source, transit, or destination countries. While several countries have passed laws addressing the major forms of trafficking, such as sexual exploitation and forced labor, some countries still do not have legislation on human trafficking, or they have laws that only criminalize certain aspects of human trafficking such as child trafficking.⁴² Articles 3 to 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly prohibit human trafficking:

Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman treatment or degrading treatment or punishment.

Women frequently see the offers made by the recruiters as an opportunity to help their families financially. Many of the young girls vulnerable to trafficking are orphans or have had to take care of younger siblings. Often they have sick parents or are from single headed households, and frequently the families themselves force their young girls to work as domestic workers in order to improve the family's living conditions. Many end up in the sex industry. Gender inequality, caused by ridged social and cultural models, and supported in several countries by discriminatory inheritance practices, herein finds its most perverted expression.

One issue closely related to human trafficking is child marriage.⁴³ According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), more than 700 million women alive today were married as children. Some 250 million were married before the age of fifteen. Girls who marry before they are eighteen are less likely to remain in school and more likely to experience domestic violence. Early marriage and low levels of women's education are directly linked to population growth, which many countries in the global South are struggling with.

Acknowledging that children and women suffer most from injustice, violence, and trafficking, Archbishop Antje Jackelén from the Church of Sweden said in her speech in Vatican City in May 2016:

However, experience proves that women also are those who bring about many of the changes needed, once they are given the

rights to education and self-determination. It is necessary not only to speak about and for women, but to speak with them, and to enable their leadership skills to contribute to the flourishing of church and society.⁴⁴

Refugees and migration

The trafficking of migrants and refugees is one of today's burning issues. The mass migration of people from crisis areas to safe countries has encouraged gangs of smugglers who unscrupulously turn refugees into commodities. There are specialized structures for trafficking people, for instance from Eritrea and West Africa to Europe.

Human trafficking is closely interconnected with the number of people who are today seeking refuge or are internally displaced worldwide. According to a new report by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), wars, conflict, and persecution have forced more people than at any other time since records began to flee their homes and seek refuge and safety elsewhere. Another major reason for migration is climate change. According to a UNHCR report, released in 2016 on World Refugee Day, the number of displaced people reached 65.3 million at the end of 2015. The report indicates that,

Situations that cause large refugee outflows are lasting longer (for example, conflicts in Somalia or Afghanistan are now into their third and fourth decades, respectively), dramatic new or reignited situations are occurring frequently (today's largest being Syria, but also in the space of the past five years South Sudan, Yemen, Burundi, Ukraine, Central African Republic, etc.), and the rate at which solutions are being found for refugees and internally displaced people has been on a falling trend since the end of the Cold War.⁴⁵

Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, where the LWF has been working since it was set up in

1991, hosts almost half a million people and functions more or less as a regular town. There is a cemetery and a considerable number of young adults living in Dadaab have never seen anything other than a refugee camp in their lives.

The fact that an increasing number of people from these conflict areas are reaching Europe has created public awareness of the issue in Europe. The European refugee crisis often overshadows the fact that the number of refugees and migrants coming to Europe is only a fraction of those seeking protection and that many other regions in the world are affected by migration from conflict areas and violent countries. Central America, for instance, struggles with huge migration problems due to widespread violence related to criminal gangs. Indigenous peoples, children, and other individuals are fleeing violence and land grabbing, particularly from El Salvador and Honduras, which are considered to be among the most violent countries in the region.⁴⁶

People are fleeing community-level violence, which is often personal and direct. They face serious threats from street gangs, extortionists, drug traffickers, and domestic abuse. If they are sent back to their countries of origin they have nowhere to turn for protection. If returned, they often become potential targets of further violence.

In the countries of destination, the migrants are often exploited by employers who pay poor wages and do not guarantee proper social security. "Isolation and invisibility are the reality for many migrant workers. Only few know their rights, which increases the risk of abuse and exploitation," is how Rev. Katherine Altenburg from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada described the reality of many migrant workers in her home country at the Latin American and Caribbean/North American pre-assembly.⁴⁷

Corruption and non-inclusion

In many contexts, corruption continues to be the key impediment to development. It hinders justice and negatively impacts the enjoyment of human rights, especially with regard to vulnerable persons and groups. It undermines people's trust in political and economic systems, institutions and leaders. It can cost people their freedom, health and money, and, in the worst case, even their lives. Small-scale local corruption and wider systemic corruption are interlinked. In some contexts, corruption is a part of everyday life and affects both public and private organizations. This is particularly true for less transparent societies and contexts.

Local churches can become part of a chain of corruption when resources destined for the public good or for the good of the church community are diverted for individual gain. This decreases trust in the church and ultimately hinders renewal. As Bishop Musa Filibus from Nigeria said at the sixtieth anniversary of the Marangu Conference in Moshi, Tanzania, "If we are serious about renewal, we should boldly name and confront corruption and financial scandals in the church."⁴⁸

The misuse of power and low levels of inclusion often hinder the sustainability of societies, organizations, and churches. Inclusiveness is a crucial value affirmed by the LWF communion. For our churches, it is time to ask if the church members feel that their gifts are being recognized and used in the church, and if our churches are welcoming and inclusive. This includes the question of the full inclusion of women in the ordained ministry. Does the decision not to ordain women not hinder their vocation, the work of the Holy Spirit? In a statement the 2016 LWF Council reaffirmed the communion's commitments to women's ordination:

While acknowledging that ordination is not a right, but rather a call, we also acknowledge

that the restriction and exclusion of women's gifts in and for the church serves to devalue all women and increases their discrimination in both church and society.⁴⁹

At five consecutive LWF assemblies—from the Seventh Assembly in Budapest in 1984 to the Eleventh Assembly in Stuttgart in 2010—the communion has urged its member churches prayerfully to discern and affirm women's theological training, their leadership, their ministry, and their full inclusion in the church, both lay and ordained.⁵⁰

Theological reflection

The human condition

Traditionally, Lutheran theology has been characterized by the understanding of the radical character of sin. Sin is primarily understood as the alienation from God, not as the sum of all "sinful deeds." The root causes for exploitation and injustice can be found in the brokenness of human nature and sinful structures. Structures that subordinate human beings and seek to control them as a means to an economic or social end are reinforced by regarding others as a means that can be used for personal interest, the misuse of power, and the fear of being deprived of one's own advantages.

Luther's understanding of the radical character of sin corresponds to his insight into the overwhelming power of God's grace. "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), all human beings, without exception, depend on God's grace and providence in order to leave self-centeredness behind, and to turn to trusting in God and being oriented toward the other. The sinful human being has been justified by God's grace alone—without any human works whatsoever. In the "Heidelberg Disputation (1518)," Luther

states, “The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.”⁵¹ The dialectic of being a sinful human being, who always remains a sinner yet is justified by God, is expressed in Luther’s famous premise, *simul iustus et peccator*. A Christian is at the same time both righteous and sinner. Luther’s concept of sin deconstructs any illusions about the human being’s ability perfectly to love God and the neighbor, and to lead a perfect life before God. Acknowledging sin in light of God’s grace helps us to be realistic about our own capabilities and offers a compelling reason to be forgiving and generous to others.⁵²

Christian vocation: turning towards the neighbor

According to Luther good works come naturally to the Christian as an expression of love and gratitude for God’s saving and loving grace. Honest and faithful work is true service, “everyday worship of God,” as Luther calls it. In his words, a Christian should work “without thought of gain,”⁵³ “without hope for reward,”⁵⁴ considering nothing but the need of the neighbor—this is a true Christian vocation. In a parable, Jesus identifies himself with the poor, the needy and the strangers:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me (Mt 25:35–37).

It needs to be recognized that today everyday life, including professional life, has become far more complex than in Luther’s time. The question who is the neighbor to whom I relate in my everyday professional life is less self-evident than it was centuries ago. Many people working for international corporations in the global North are frequently asked to fulfill tasks that contribute to

exploiting those who are employed by the same companies elsewhere, particularly in the global South. Carrying out their professional tasks may constitute a conflict with the Lutheran work ethics. There where human beings are being exploited as a means to an economic end, the church must affirm our calling to love the neighbor as a creature with inherent, divine value, regardless of the ability to increase structural or economic wealth. The Lutheran ethics of vocation can prevent us from conforming to the idea that work is a way to earn as much money as possible. It reminds us that work should be conceived as a way to serve God and the neighbor, and to promote justice and well-being.

Promoting justice and calling for repentance

The church is called to promote justice in society and to advocate for the oppressed and marginalized, for example by advocating for a change in prevailing laws. According to the Lutheran understanding, justification and justice belong together. Luther used to distinguish between two kinds of justice: righteousness that bestows gifts and is redemptive (*iustitia passiva*) and the demanding justice of God (*iustitia activa*). While the first is God’s full and pure gift, which is accepted without human beings adding anything and valid only in God’s presence (justification), the second involves human work with God, which is valid in the presence of other human beings. God wishes God’s own righteousness to be mirrored in people’s lives. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled,” says Jesus Christ in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:6).

One of the expressions of this call is living in freedom and gender equality. The *LWF Gender Justice Policy*, adopted by the Council in 2013, defines gender justice as follows:

Gender justice implies the protection and promotion of the dignity of women and men

who, being created in the image of God, are co-responsible stewards of creation. Gender justice is expressed through equality and balanced power relations between women and men and the elimination of the institutional, cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression that sustain discrimination.⁵⁵

Furthermore, the church must call for repentance so that unjust structures are dismantled, human greed set aside, and hate and violence buried because of a change of heart and mind. God's grace opens the way and gives us the freedom to repent.

Repentance is the turning away from sin. The church should not address the call for repentance only to those on the "outside," but see where a change of heart and mind is needed in its inner structures and its own outward actions.

In some cases, it may be necessary to repent for having collaborated too closely with unjust state powers. In others, the church may need to repent for its passivity. Throughout its history, the church has far too often followed society into traditionalism, absolutism, or imperialism; it has been and often is actively and passively sinful with respect to the market logic. We must repent by divesting from economies that commodify human beings or condone their trafficking. Furthermore, we must repent for not speaking up on behalf of those who are marginalized by the market forces.

Instead, the church should be guided by the example of Jesus Christ through whom true Godlikeness was restored after it had been distorted by sin.

He would never act in his own interest, but in the interest of his fellow human beings, especially in the interest of those who were outsiders in the society of the time. He took responsibility for them, he suffered and died

for them on the cross and in this way revealed what love can do. So, in him we can perceive the true character of the *imago Dei*.⁵⁶

Seeds of hope

Despite current attempts to change human beings into commodities or to increase inequality, there are several initiatives to fight against the violation of human dignity. Both nationally and internationally the role of religious actors in society is increasingly being recognized. Churches and faith-based organizations have particular expertise when it comes to addressing religious traditions and the role of religion in promoting development. They represent broad social networks, as is the case of churches that are members of local, regional, and global ecumenical organizations. By motivating and mobilizing people for action at the grass roots, and locally, nationally, and internationally engaging in advocacy, churches can serve the people and contribute to the just development of society. Faith, religion, and spiritual practices must be taken into account when critiquing the economic system built on exclusion, oppression, and commodification. In a system where displacement or mobility and individualism are the norm, a faith that provides belonging, recognition, and participation is highly relevant.

Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015, the UN adopted an agenda that defined seventeen goals covering a wide range of issues, including ending poverty and hunger and promoting well-being; ensuring access to education, water and energy; and working for peace and equality. In a worldly analogy to Christ's promise to make "all things new" (Rev 21:5), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁵⁷ represent an opportunity to enhance human dignity and stewardship. The SDGs relate to the churches' witness and

correspond to the LWF's understanding of the church's role in the public space. Many of the aims articulated in the SDGs are clearly linked to the churches' commitment and to what they have been doing for decades, e.g., to end poverty (SDG 1); to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG 4); to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls (SDG 5); etc. By contributing to reaching the SDGs, the churches help to ensure that the world is moving toward the aim of "leaving no one behind." The SDGs offer a great opportunity to connect with this new commitment of the UN as a community of states.

Alternative economic concepts

Although as yet no one has come up with a comprehensive alternative to the market economy, in recent years some new ideas have emerged. Radical concepts such as the "economy of enough"—of particular relevance in the wealthier countries that need to learn to live with less so that others may simply live—are being developed. In Latin America, different models and practices are unfolding. The concept of an economy of solidarity embraces a variety of ways in which work and income are generated. Work is done collectively by men and women and is based on self-management. An economy of solidarity breaks the market logic based on competition and consumption by eliminating the division between people, the means of production, and the results of their work. It is essentially based on reciprocity, and mainly women are creating spaces for these alternative ways of building market relations. The participation of women in these spaces does not only result in increased income. Together with economic empowerment, these women are gaining greater control over their choices in other spheres of their lives. The exercise of sharing everything in the collective space—from material items to feelings, sensations, joys and difficulties—creates a rich experience that empowers women to take responsibility and make decisions for themselves.

A just economy will inevitably promote a system wherein greater well-being is experienced. A concept that has been developed in Latin America, is *Buenvivir* ("good living"). "Good living" is an indigenous concept, also called *Sumak Kawsay* (in Quechua), or *Suma Qamaña* (in Aymara). In Latin America, Bolivia and Ecuador have included the principle of living in harmony with nature and the community in their constitutions. Sharing is a central notion for an economy of good living. Moreover, sharing in solidarity is a mechanism for regulating community life. It helps to avoid accumulating goods and to slow down consumerism by aiming to have enough, or living with what is enough.

In some countries, the idea of a basic income grant (BIG) is being introduced. In Namibia, the BIG Coalition of Churches, NGOs, youth organizations, and trade unions have been demanding the introduction of a basic income grant as one of the methods to eradicate poverty in Namibia. It is argued that a monthly cash grant, to be paid by the state to every Namibian citizen, would improve everyone's life by eradicating destitution and reducing poverty and inequality. The BIG allows the recipient to choose how to spend the money and thus enhances freedom and personal responsibility. It is not an act of charity but provides people with the right to a decent life.⁵⁸

New economic models such as these contribute to the goal of liberating human beings from the tyranny of an economy that commodifies people. The economy must serve the welfare of beings, not vice versa. Liberation from the idea of a sovereign market is a major step towards restoring and honoring human dignity.

Welcoming the stranger

In 2012, the then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, invited religious leaders to discuss the religious foundations for receiving refugees. The outcome of this process

was the document *Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders*, compiled by a coalition of faith-based organizations and academic institutions, which included, among others, the LWF, Jesuit Refugee Service, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the World Council of Churches, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and others. The text of the declaration draws upon principles and values of welcome that are deeply rooted in all major religions including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.

The document invites faith leaders to welcome refugees and migrants. It reminds us that “all persons are entitled to dignity and respect as human beings” and acknowledges that “welcoming the stranger sometimes takes courage, but the joys and the hopes of doing so outweigh the risks and the challenges.”⁵⁹

Promoting just and participatory structures, the rule of law, and social protection for all

From 2014 to 2016, a theological study process in the Lutheran communion highlighted the role of the church in the public space. The final document, *The Church in the Public Space. A Study Document of the Lutheran World Federation*, affirms the church’s call to public engagement. It points out that Lutherans are committed to strengthening public space as a just place for all and mentions three important elements that characterize public space as a just place for all: (a) equal access to common goods and political decision-making processes; (b) safety, especially for the vulnerable; and (c) meaningful participation of and interaction among all groups of society.⁶⁰

For Lutherans, just and accountable governance in church and society are a key concern. As churches engage for justice and peace in society, the affirmation of and public advocacy for the rule of law are vital.

The rule of law is a principle of governance whereby all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the state itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, independently adjudicated, and consistent with international human rights norms and standards. It furthermore requires measures to ensure adherence to the principles of the supremacy of the law, equality before the law, accountability to the law, fairness in the application of the law, the separation of powers, participation in decision making, legal certainty, avoidance of arbitrariness, and procedural and legal transparency.⁶¹

Furthermore, the churches’ diaconal engagement compels them actively to advocate for social protection for all. This includes access to affordable, good quality social services, such as education, healthcare, and other social care, as well as cash transfers such as child allowances, unemployment benefits, and old-age pensions. Churches recognize the primary responsibility of states to protect their citizens by guaranteeing social protection floors for all. Social protection floors are nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees that should ensure, as a minimum, that over the life cycle all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security, which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level. Taxation is an important instrument for upholding the common good by redistributing wealth, financing basic services that guarantee social and economic rights, and deepening the state’s accountability to the people.⁶²

In the midst of complexities, the church unequivocally raises a prophetic voice when people’s dignity is violated and basic human rights are infringed upon. At times, the church can use established procedures to advocate for the marginalized and excluded, at others it needs to find creative ways to address injustice.

STUDY BOOK

The gospel entails a clear vision of transforming oppressive structures and destructive systems. Christians are called to engage in politics, not for the sake of power, but for the sake of empowering those who suffer injustice. The church promotes the rule of law and good governance as vital structural conditions for justice and peace in society.⁶³

The church always lives in the tension of being “in” the world but not “of” the world. It needs to avoid overemphasizing either one of the two aspects. On the one hand, standing against the world, at the risk of not being in it,

can result in the church becoming irrelevant and isolated. On the other, being absorbed into the world and getting too comfortable with prevailing systems and structures can result in the church losing its prophetic voice. A church which has “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Mt 5:6) and is willing to stand up for the equal dignity of all human beings, needs to be courageous and open to renewal by the transforming Spirit of God. The church constantly needs to ask anew which ideologies, worldviews, and economic structures diminish human dignity and thus need to be addressed.





Creation —Not for Sale

It is not only human beings who suffer under “economic growth” and human greed; all creation is groaning. When human beings ventured into space for the first time, the world saw with a sense of wonder and awe the first photographs of the earth, the part of creation that is our home. There was an immediate awareness that our home was not immense and unlimited, but small, finite, and vulnerable. Some fifty years later, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we are standing on the edge of a global climate catastrophe. What is the scope of the ecological problem and the challenges it gives rise to? How does it relate to us and commit us, as believers, Christians and Lutherans? What have we been doing, and how can we deepen and strengthen our action? In reflecting on these three core questions, let us discern together how God’s grace liberates us to better serve the God we confess as the Creator of heaven and earth.

Context

As we assess the current situation with regard to the theme, Creation—Not for Sale, two particular areas stand out:

- A situation of unsustainable overshoot and increasing risk
- The material and conceptual roots of the problem.

A situation of unsustainable overshoot and increasing risk

8 August 2016: On that day, humanity had consumed its entire ecological budget for the

year 2016. From that date until 31 December 2016, we ran on an ecological deficit and increased humankind’s ecological debt. For almost half a century, every year since the beginning of the 1970s, humanity has extracted more resources than the earth can provide and emitted more waste than the earth can absorb. We have reached this limit sooner with each decade: 15 October in 1993; 13 September in 2003; 10 August 2013. If we keep evolving at this pace, by 2083 we will have consumed our ecological budget by around 13 January. We are in a situation of unsustainable global overshoot.

Calculations to determine this metaphorical day are based on the Ecological Footprint (EF),⁶⁴ an indicator that measures

how much area of biologically productive land and water an individual, population or activity requires to produce all the resources it consumes and to absorb the waste it generates, using prevailing technology and resource management practices.⁶⁵

It is expressed in global hectares (gha). The earth’s biocapacity is currently 1.7 gha per person while humanity’s EF is 2.7 gha per person. In other words, nowadays we are unsustainably consuming 1.6 planets per year, and our consumption is increasing. Half of the world’s EF is made up of its carbon footprint, underlining the need to address fossil fuel extraction and consumption.

Countries have varying EFs. The more developed a country is, the higher is its EF. For example, France, with an EF of 4.2 gha per

person, is an ecological debtor, while Malawi, with an EF of 0.7 gha per person, is an ecological creditor. This means that if everyone on earth were to live like the average French person, we would need 2.4 planets, while if all lived like the average Malawian, we would only need 0.4 planet. Thus, countries have different responsibilities.

Acutely aware of the danger, scientists are trying to define what could be the safe operating space for humanity. One key attempt outlines nine “planetary boundaries,”⁶⁶ which we should not cross⁶⁷ with regard to nine issues: climate change; the loss of biodiversity; pollution; stratospheric ozone depletion; atmospheric aerosol loading; ocean acidification; change of biochemical flows (notably the phosphorus and nitrogen cycles); the use of land and freshwater. Of these climate change and the loss of biodiversity are identified as core issues, in the sense that the crossing of their boundaries could, each by itself, drive the earth system into a new state. Of the seven boundaries scientists can quantify, four have already been crossed: climate change and the change in biochemical flows, in the “increasing risk” category, and the loss of biodiversity and land use in the “high risk” category. At the planetary level, we are increasingly facing high and systemic risks. We have impacted the earth system in such a way that, in the eyes of an increasing number of scientists, we have entered a new geological epoch: the “anthropocene,” or the “epoch of humans.”

Many LWF member churches struggle with issues related to land and freshwater use. Our desire to consolidate and exploit land in order to increase the production of crops and extraction of minerals for economic gain causes suffering and instability throughout our communion. As Cedrick Yumba Kitwa of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Congo shares, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example

Due to the lack of alternative energy sources, most local people are using wood and charcoal.

Thousands of trees disappear every day. But moreover, it is the timber industry that logs millions of trees and exports them on a massive scale, mainly to Europe.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, a considerable amount of land worldwide was sold off to foreign investors. Some of these deals qualify as land grabs (some estimates suggest around 200 billion hectares).⁶⁸ Land grabbing is a term that was defined in the Tirana Declaration (2011) by the International Land Coalition (ILC), which has more than 150 member organizations, from community groups to the World Bank.⁶⁹ “Land grab” means that land deals are made without the free, prior, and informed consent of the affected communities. This often results in farmers being forced to leave their homes and families going hungry. Particularly implicated are Asia and Africa. Stephen Munga, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, writes,

Ongoing land disputes in Tanzania have created and boosted a modern neocolonial system that enhances the power of a few wealthy people and companies as well as transnational corporations at the expense of smallholder peasants and indigenous communities who are displaced and dispossessed.⁷⁰

Deforestation and land grabbing that support monoculture constitute a huge threat to many animal species. In the Bible, Deuteronomy affirms the right of animals to reproduction and therefore their sustainability:

If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young (Deut 22:6).

Today, however, many species are either already extinct or close to extinction due to the

exploitation of nature. Here land grabbing plays an important role.

Currently, approximately forty percent of the world's population live without access to safe drinking water. There are several reasons for this. Approximately seventy percent of the world's total fresh water is being used for the production of food and agrofuels. Around the world, aquifers and water sources are cumulatively polluted by agricultural, industrial, and mining waste. Contaminated water has serious consequences since eighty percent of the diseases affecting two-thirds of the world's population are related to poor drinking water and sanitation. The lack of clean water for washing and drinking raises the likelihood of water-borne diseases across the Sahel region of Africa. A greater risk of disease coupled with the need to collect clean, potable water increases the probability that women and children will miss opportunities for education and social advancement.⁷¹ Acute consequences of habitat loss and desertification highlight the disproportional effect that climate change has on the daily lives of the vulnerable—women and children.

Although those most impacted are people living in the global South, the access to clean, safe water can also become a problem in the global North, where it normally affects economically and socially disadvantaged communities. An example of this is the 2016 scandal in Flint, Michigan, USA, where 41.6 percent of residents live below the poverty line and 56.6 percent of city's population are Afro-American. Cost-cutting measures taken by the state government in 2014 had led to tainted drinking water that contained lead and other toxins that are particularly harmful to babies and children. Health effects of lead exposure in children include impaired cognition, behavioral disorders, hearing problems, and delayed puberty.

The experience of these concrete consequences of the exploitation of nature has led to growing public awareness. Moreover,

scientific progress and communication, civil society engagement, the mobilization of citizens, and political actions have resulted in increased visibility of the ecological issue. Even though the level of action varies between people, territories, and countries, we are witnessing the beginning of the ambitious, worldwide ecological transition that the situation demands.

The material and conceptual roots of the problem

How have we reached this point? Paul Ehrlich's equation explains the material causes of the ecological problem: $I = P \cdot A \cdot T$. "I" stands for "impact," "P" for "population," "A" for "affluence," and "T" for "technology." The ecological impact of a specific group of people is a factor of the number of people, the level of their wealth (understood as consumption of goods and services, i.e., resources extracted and waste emitted), and the quality of technology (whether or not it is efficient in its demand for resources and the amount of waste it generates).

While technological efficiency has improved, the population and affluence have increased exponentially since the mid-twentieth century. The world population has grown from 2.5 billion people in 1950 to 7 billion since 2011 (+ 180 percent). The world GDP (in 2010 USD PPP)⁷² has grown from 7.0 trillion in 1950 to 77.2 trillion in 2011 (+ 1,003 percent). As a result, the impact on natural resources, both abiotic (ores, land, water, etc.) and biotic (fish, cattle, forests, etc.), has also grown exponentially. This impact growth has been called the "great acceleration."

A recent UN report shows that consumption continues to drive up levels of material extraction.⁷³ For a decade the amount of material needed to produce a unit of GDP—or "material intensity"—has also steadily increased. The correlation between economic growth and material demand suggests that

technological progress alone is highly unlikely to solve the problem.

Implicit in the three material factors of population (P), affluence (A), and technology (T) is the second root of the problem: the ways of thinking and acting that shape the way in which we live. We can call this the “imaginary”⁷⁴ of our societies. Here the imaginary is understood as that pool of theological, spiritual, and philosophical concepts and beliefs that shape or cultivate values. Certain cultural forces lead people to believe that human beings are separate from and superior to nature; nature consists of limitless matter and energy that can be dominated and exploited for the material good of the free individual; economic growth is the principal measure of a nation’s progress and its members’ well-being; and one’s value and success can be evaluated by one’s consumption or increase in capital. These concepts were instrumental in the process that led to the deterioration and planetary unsustainability that we now experience.

The ecological problem has material causes that must be rectified. But these material causes have conceptual roots, which are philosophical, spiritual and theological, and need to be addressed.

Theological reflection

For half a century, the ecological crisis has raised new questions regarding the relationship between God and creation; between human creatures and the rest of creation; among human beings locally and globally; and the relationship between divine activity and human responsibility. In order to tackle these questions, we need a more eco-centered theology that does not only take into account God’s saving work with human beings, but is oriented towards the liberation of all creation. We need to move from being human centered to being creation centered;

from focusing on God’s relationship with humans alone to focusing on God’s relationship with all of creation; from extreme individualism toward care for the common good of our planet. As human beings we need to invert the self-centeredness through which we are curved in upon ourselves and have treated the rest of creation as an unlimited resource that is there only for our sake, for use and abuse.

The relationships between God and creation

The confession of faith in the Triune God starts with the article “I believe in God...creator of heaven and earth.” To confess the Trinity is to profess that God is essentially relational, God-in-communion. But God is not relational only within Godself. Loving relationships are inherently creative. The book of Genesis affirms that the universe was created by the plenitude of the divine will for life-giving relationships. And so, God desires a life-sustaining communion with that creation. This biblical and theological affirmation contradicts the conception of God as being self-sufficient and absent from creation, controlling it from outside or above. Instead, God has an intimate relationship with all of creation and is present in creation. In the liturgy we praise God with the words of prophet Isaiah: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole Earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3). Isaiah declares that God’s presence fills the whole earth, which is God’s sanctuary.

Martin Luther wrote how God is present “in, with, and under” all things:

God is substantially present everywhere, in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all, but without His being encompassed and surrounded by it...How can reason tolerate it that the Divine Majesty is so small that it can be substantially present in a grain, on a grain, through a grain, within and without...

His own divine essence can be in all creatures collectively and in each one individually more profoundly, more intimately, more present than the creature is in itself, yet it can be encompassed nowhere and by no one.⁷⁵

Hence, God enlivens creation; God is the source of all being rather than the observer who intervenes from outside.

God's incarnation in Jesus is the most profound and decisive revelation of God's intimate relationship with creation. In Jesus, divinity and humanity, the glory of God and substance of the earth are brought together. He tells his disciples to go "into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). The Good News of God's reconciling and life-giving communion is thus not meant only for human beings. The Apostle Paul affirms that

the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God...in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:19, 21).

The new creation, grounded in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, encompasses all of creation.

Relationships between human beings and the rest of creation

For far too long, Christians have defined their relationship to the rest of the creation by way of misinterpreting the verbs "to subdue" and "to have dominion" that are found in the first account of creation (Gen 1:28). At the same time, we have neglected the verbs "to cultivate" and "to keep" that are found in the second account of creation (Gen 2:15). The first two verbs were often interpreted literally, outside their narrative context, which envisions a world where humans either forage or farm only vegetables and fruits (Gen 1:29). In the

beginning neither human beings nor the land were instrumentalized, but a harmonious solidarity between all creatures with inherent value was sustained by non-violence and respect for life.⁷⁶ As for the two other verbs, they clearly express the fact that we are to be stewards of God's creation⁷⁷ in ways that respect the life-giving equilibrium and rhythms in which it was conceived.

The belief that human beings are separate from and above nature has often led to justifying the exploitation of creation in ways that serve human ends unsustainably and unjustly. God declared that each part of creation is inherently good, meaning it is an end unto itself by virtue of its participation in the web of life as conceived by God. Our refusal to remove ourselves from the center of that world is the deeper meaning of sin. It is our failure to "live out the relational matrix we share with the rest of the creation and with God."⁷⁸ Sin is the refusal to acknowledge our life as part of an interdependent web of relationships, and our responsibility to grant each creature their proper place so that all creation may flourish.

The prophets are replete with references to ways in which creation suffers when human beings use other creatures as a means to economic or political gain. Isaiah paints a picture of a dried and withered earth that staggers under exploitation by its inhabitants, rendering its vineyards barren to the point that even the sun and the moon are ashamed (Isa 24). In many ways the Sabbath laws were designed to ease the burden of production and economic instrumentalization. Along with national and foreign born laborers, animals were also granted their days of rest from productivity (Ex 20:8–11). The land was to lie fallow, and even wild animals were to benefit from this restorative justice (Ex 23:1–13).

And of course, the Sabbath years were conceived as moments to liberate servants,

animals, and the land itself from production, and return them to their proper place in the world for the health, security, and redemption of all creation. God is quick to remind the faithful that “the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Lev 25:23–24). Christ’s call to repentance in Mark 1:15 compels us to a Sabbatical return to our proper relationship with the Creator and creation. This call liberates us from our human will to be gods and to assume our rightful place in the world for the welfare of all creation.

Relationships between human beings

By exploiting creation, human beings do not only harm nature but also inflict serious suffering on other humans being. Like the Prophets before us, today we realize that social and ecological challenges go hand in hand.

The effects of climate change offer examples of how an ecological issue is at its core a matter of justice and peace. It is a matter of international, intergenerational, and social justice, threatening to exacerbate well-known causes of conflict. While all countries will be affected by climate change, the maximum harm is likely to occur in the global South.⁷⁹ Thus it is a matter of international justice. Countries that have historically emitted few or the least greenhouse gases (GHG) will be the most affected. It further poses questions of distributive and restorative justice between nations, making it not only a matter of ecological, but also economic justice.

While previous and today’s generations have emitted significant amounts of GHG, the coming generations will suffer the most. If emissions are not cut in time, human-induced climate change will last for centuries and impact the lives of many generations to come. In this way, the current use of fossil fuels and land pose serious questions of intergenerational justice.

Finally, those who suffer first and foremost from the effects of climate change are the poor and most vulnerable. In most parts of the world, many have never had access to the activities and lifestyles that cause most of the GHG emissions. On the one hand the majority of the poor are located in areas that will be exposed to the most severe consequences of climate change. On the other, poor countries and populations are less able to face the challenges brought about by climate change. Questions of social and ecological justice are therefore closely interconnected.

The Prophet Amos reminds us that economic injustice is closely associated with ecological breakdown, and therefore with political and social instability and violence. Amos describes how economic injustice is a departure from God’s will for creation, and how that leads to environmental breakdown; the earth is forced to change its natural rhythms (Am 8). The young experience poverty, hunger, and thirst, and violence comes in its wake. God’s closing vision to Amos is the hope of restoration and peace. Where the inhabitants of the earth act justly, the land will once again bear its fruit (Am 9:11–15). Creation’s welfare will be restored when justice rolls “down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am 5:24).

As Christians, we are called to strive for justice and peace. In light of the need for a new theology and spirituality that deeply respect God’s whole creation, as well as the willingness to do justice in the face of suffering caused to nature and other human beings by the exploitation of creation, churches and communities are called to prayerful action.

Divine activity and human responsibility

In several biblical passages, extreme weather events are attributed to God and

weather-related disasters have often been considered “acts of God.” People in many parts of the world see God as the initiator of floods, storms, drought, earthquakes, and other “natural” catastrophes. This focus on theodicy raises questions regarding the relationship between divine activity and human responsibility. How do we respond, theologically, when people explain the destructive consequences of disasters as God’s punishment?

It would be cynical to attribute climate change to “acts of God.” The people of God should rather seek the help of science in order to learn more about what God has created and how all of creation is interrelated. Poorly conceived notions about the relationship between God, creation, and human beings have profoundly influenced the way in which modern societies are shaped, and have led to many of the injustices of climate change that we observe today.

However, God acts in history and is therefore somehow also present in the midst of climate change. As we face the destructive consequences of climate change and ask where God’s presence is in all of this, Luther’s notion of the revealed and hidden God might prove helpful. Creation allows us to affirm God’s generosity and benevolence, but it is equally a reminder that God is more than that. God is also manifest in ways that are not always comprehensible to us. Luther claimed that God is ever present and ever concealed within the intricate mask of creation. In evil, the opposite of that which is good, we realize that the visible is not able fully to reveal God. It would be a mistake to name that which is the mask as God, confusing the creature with the Creator, even if the mask conveys in part what it hides.⁸⁰

God is revealed on the cross, in the suffering of Christ. The Apostle Paul describes the suffering of creation in Romans 8:22, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning

in labor pains until now.” The suffering of creation, of the world, recalls the suffering of Christ at the cross and also finds redemption in it. Similar to the experience of the cross, where death is overcome through resurrection, there is anticipation that creation too will be renewed at the time of the resurrection. Our faith in a good and loving God calls and compels us to participate in the redemption and reconciliation of all creation that God has revealed in Christ Jesus. In the “already but not yet” nature of this participation, our discipleship corresponds to God’s will for human beings to be the keepers of creation that has existed since the beginning.

Seeds of Hope

Changes in attitudes and legislation

According to an old proverb, “a falling tree makes more noise than a growing forest.” This resonates well with the ecological issue. A keen eye will observe that as people become conscious of the issue they take action, set up creative initiatives, and vote for new laws. Seeds are beginning to germinate.

At the individual level, more and more people embody the change they want to see for the world. Yuki Yamato of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church joined the “I Fast for the Climate” action that started in 2013. Pascal from the Lutheran Church of Senegal has stopped using plastic and recycles plastic garbage into small bags and purses.

These initiatives matter. And what is more, acting makes one happy. As Vera Tkach of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Russia and Other States recounts,

During the climate marches at the UN meeting, I felt that our campaigning work with ecumenical and interfaith partners and with social media was very dynamic and joyful, too.

At the level of civil society, talents and goodwill (a renewable energy) converge to walk the talk and influence decision makers. NGOs, large and small, are at the forefront. They act on the ground, planting trees, protecting animals from poaching, and blocking the construction of new pipelines. And they speak out, like on that day when 400,000 packed the streets of New York City to advocate for bold action on climate. Little by little, businesses commit to positive changes. The sharp decline in the price of solar energy, for example, is a strong signal on the market. Given the spiritual nature of the issue, we can be particularly heartened by the recent upsurge in the commitment of religious actors. In the run-up to COP21,⁸¹ an unprecedented number of confessional,⁸² ecumenical, and interfaith texts were published, and concrete local initiatives within faith communities multiplied.

At the political level, there has also been some progress, with countries legislating and achieving encouraging results. For example, Ecuador recently revised its Constitution, which now reads: “We... hereby decide to build a new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve the good way of living.” In Germany, green energy set a new national record by meeting seventy-eight percent of the daily electricity demand with renewable sources.⁸³ Costa Rica ran on one hundred percent renewable energy for seventy-six days between June and August in 2016.⁸⁴ In 2015, geothermal energy accounted for fifty-one percent of Kenya’s energy with wind energy providing a considerable part of its energy supply.⁸⁵

News published in 2016 of the closing of the ozone hole proved that international negotiations (the Montreal Protocol) can deliver, an effect much hoped for from the Paris Agreement on climate change, which came into force at less than a year after its adoption at COP21. COP22 in Marrakech, Morocco, saw negotiations being pursued, despite the recent

elections in the USA. Moreover, countries are continuing to move towards implementation.

Deepening and strengthening our commitment

The LWF and its member churches have for decades been committed to the care of God’s good and beautiful gift of creation. They have spoken up as a prophetic voice, practiced what they preach, and offered viable solutions.

From the first appearance of the issue in the report of the Sixth Assembly in Dar El Salam, Tanzania, in 1977, to the 2016 Council Resolution on Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the LWF has regularly taken a strong position, particularly articulating the issue as a matter of justice and care for the most vulnerable. It has advocated accordingly, especially thanks to the leadership of the youth, who represented the LWF at the UN climate change conferences, from COP17 to COP22. Jeff Buhse from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, who represented the North American region at COP21, remembers,

As a LWF delegate, I have been a part of one of the largest gathering of international leaders at COP 21 in Paris, France, and have seen the impact of what 72 million Lutherans can have. Our talking points and the history of what the LWF has done were so clear and concise. I cannot stress enough how important to me it is that the LWF has taken such a strong stance on this issue and assigned it to the LWF youth to work on it.

And Pranita Biswasi of the Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church in India, representing the Asia region, adds,

We advocate at the global level, because as people of faith, we have been given responsibility to care for creation and securing

it for future generations. For the LWF and its members, climate change is a question of stewardship and intergenerational solidarity.

The LWF has been working on the ground promoting farm-based enterprises and cooperatives in Nepal; protecting and restoring the mangrove ecosystem in El Salvador; and taking care of refugees who fled Somalia at the height of the 2011 drought; or Ethiopia, which, because of drought, declared a state of emergency in 2016. As Biruk Kebede from the LWF Ethiopia program stated at the COP22 in Marrakech,

People are saying climate change is going to affect Africa after twenty years. The link that is missing is that the migration is happening because of the hunger. The hunger is happening because of the drought and the drought is happening because of climate change. So it is time for us to create awareness about those correlations and the root causes of climate change.

The LWF recently committed to become carbon neutral by 2050, and the LWF Council in 2015 voted “not to invest in fossil fuels.” Several climate training programs, capacity building, and climate projects are organized every year, locally and regionally.

Yet, as scientific analysis shows, despite all the good spirit and efforts undertaken by people from all walks of life, the world has not done enough. There is a significant risk that these great initiatives end up being marginal, too slow, and too late. Action needs to be broader and catalyzed. How can we deepen and strengthen our commitment?

Not only each one of us individually, but also each parish, member church, and the LWF as a communion can reflect on this issue through prayer and a renewed reading of the Scriptures, guided by God’s call to

be good stewards of God’s creation. Good ideas are, fortunately, not scarce. Taking time to contemplate creation and to cultivate a sense of gratefulness; advancing theological knowledge; keeping abreast with discoveries and developments in the sciences; preaching regularly on care for creation; providing educational material for young people; promoting responsible agriculture; funding companies that contribute to ecological transition; nurturing a network of committed actors; collaborating with ecumenical and interfaith partners as well as secular civil society; addressing decision-makers—all of these are good practices.

By moving in this direction, our societies would not only work on solving the ecological problem. They would improve the resilience and sustainability of our economies; create millions of net jobs; help combat poverty; decrease the vulnerability of exposed communities; contribute to the renewal of social ties; promote justice, peace and human rights; and prepare a safe future for our children. We would be participating in the healing of all creation.

It is only during the past decades that we have become fully conscious of the consequences of our ways of life, and today’s generations need to take decisive steps. We stand at the crossroads. At times, facing the magnitude of the ecological challenge, we may feel like David fighting Goliath. As we continue our journey together, let us remember who won.



Liberating Grace: The Call We Share

The call to participate in God's mission

God's liberating grace fills us with faith, hope, and love, and empowers us to participate in God's mission in this world. God, Creator of heaven and earth, has called us into a deep relationship with one another and with the world. God is present and active in this world, from the very first moment when God created the world and breathed God's spirit into human nostrils, to the moment when all of creation will enjoy the fullness of life. God liberates God's people from slavery, is faithful to God's promise and covenant, and equips God's people to work for justice and peace for all creation. God shows profound compassion with the broken world through the incarnation in Jesus Christ. Jesus offered his life for others. In word and deed he proclaimed God's reign, and in his death on the cross and resurrection he overcame the destructive power of sin and death, and turned the logic of this world upside down. God's presence and intervention in this world continue through the Holy Spirit who empowers and transforms hearts and minds.

As people touched by God's liberating engagement with the world we are called to participate in God's mission. The LWF understands mission to be holistic, encompassing proclamation, diakonia, and advocacy.⁸⁶ This reflects the early church's understanding of holistic mission, which encompassed proclamation (*kerygma*), worship (*leiturgia*), public witness (*martyria*), and service (*diakonia*). In our words and deeds we follow the way of Jesus, who preached, cared for the needy, and defended the excluded.

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us (2 Cor 4:5–7).

God in mission is a Triune God. God's mission as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier is closely related to mission as transformation, reconciliation, and empowerment. These three dimensions are enhanced mainly in the missiological understanding of the threefold way of Christ, i.e., in a Christocentric manner: the way of incarnation, the way of the cross, and the way of the resurrection.

Transformation suggests a reorientation of life with all its aspirations, ideologies, structures, and values. The Apostle Paul affirms that this transformation takes place at different levels. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, he writes "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" At the level of the individual, this transformation is a consequence of the justification of the sinner by God's grace. At the structural level of collective society, the church must renounce unjust and violent practices and structures in public and domestic spheres as sinful and denounce them as destructive to life in society. The same is true for the church itself. As it follows the way of Christ, the church itself undergoes transformation, which may often be painful and is not always experienced as a glorious or joyous event.

Reconciliation is grounded in the message that God has reconciled the world in Jesus Christ. The grace of this unmerited reconciliation makes it possible to extend reconciliation to relations within a family, with other groups, in society, between nations, and with all of God's creation. Paul writes,

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us (2 Cor 5:18–20).

As an ambassador of reconciliation, the church is called to mediate, to restore peaceful coexistence, and to build and sustain relations. The ministry of reconciliation implies bold witness, courageous action, and committed advocacy for the sake of the oppressed and marginalized.

The Holy Spirit empowers the church and followers of Jesus to engage in this transformative ministry of reconciliation. However, power must be understood in its proper context. The ministry of Jesus reminds us that divine power is creative and life giving, and must resist the misuse of power as “power over” others. To walk in the way of Christ is to share power in a life-giving way. Empowerment must happen both at the individual and collective levels. In the church, every baptized believer is endowed with a special gift for mission, for mutual up-building, and encouragement. At the societal level, the church should alleviate immediate needs—material and economic as well as emotional and spiritual.⁸⁷

The call to contribute as church to a shared public space in society

Lutherans affirm the public role and responsibility of religious communities. As

churches we are called actively to contribute to the common good by sharing our faith perspective on the origin and purpose of life and on what it means to be human.

[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (Mic 6:8).

We are called to articulate our understanding of a just and peaceful society, advocate against oppressive structures, and serve people in need. In the face of human structures of competition and exclusion, we strongly affirm the equal dignity of all human beings, as women and men, young and old, and differently abled people. We uphold that the vocations of all should be honored and the service of each equally welcomed. We underline the importance of dialogue and conviviality for our societies, based on reciprocal relationships, and mutual respect for differences.

In times of shrinking space for civil society, churches are called to help create a shared public space as a just place for all: with human rights being safeguarded and with equal access to common goods and political decision-making processes; safety, especially for the vulnerable; and the meaningful participation of and interaction among all groups of society. Just as Martin Luther's theological reflections erupted into the public space, the Lutheran churches today must act as citizens of the world. It should also be a space for dialogue and cooperation between people of different religious traditions and non-religious convictions. While many societies seek to maintain security through the deterrent of armed and economic conflict, the church is called to walk the way of peace together with others and to build relationships of trust.

When claiming an active presence in the public space, it is helpful to recall the distinction between the worldly and the spiritual realms that has been characteristic of Lutheran

teaching. In the spiritual realm, listening to the good news of God's deep love and mercy for this world stands at the center. In the worldly realm, the rule of law is key so that all people may live together in justice and peace. Societies need participatory processes in the public space in order to create and uphold just laws.

The call to be church in communion

Communion (*koinonia*) is a precious gift that the churches have received by God's grace. Yet, it is also a task. As God's incarnation took place within a specific context (Lk 2:1–2), God's mission always takes place in particular social, economic, political, religious, and cultural contexts. It is in these various contexts that the church needs to find appropriate words and actions that witness to God's liberating power. At the same time, churches are called into communion. This means to rejoice together and to carry each other's burdens: "Our hearts rejoice when sister churches flourish and are heavy when they suffer" (1 Cor 12). Communion calls churches to pray for one another and to share resources with each other, both spiritual and material. As Bishop Josiah Kibira from Tanzania, who was the LWF president from 1977 to 1984, said: "There is no church, so big and so rich, that it wouldn't depend on the gifts of others; there is no church so small and so poor it wouldn't be able to enrich others." Our task is therefore to share with each other the gifts that have been bestowed upon us and to let ourselves be enriched by others.

The call to communion invites the LWF member churches to reflect on ways to find an appropriate balance between the churches' autonomy and context on the one hand, and their mutual accountability on the other. As expressed in earlier chapters of this study book, being bound to one another also implies dealing with diversity and disagreements. Therefore, it is relevant to establish structured

ways of dialoguing across our communion. Our commitment to dialogue and reconciliation is a witness to the power of divine love in the midst of a world where differences too often result in factions and polarization.

We need to be firm in our convictions and make use of that which can orient the communion in the task of accountable decision making:

- The gospel is the core of our life in communion
- Word and sacraments are events of communion
- The message of the cross heals our brokenness
- The Word of God creates and affirms both unity and diversity
- The gospel entails freedom, respect, and bearing with one another.⁸⁸

In the same way that we should not be "turned into ourselves" as individuals or as churches, we should not concentrate only on ourselves as a communion. Jesus' prayer "that they may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (Jn 17:21), reminds us of God's will for the unity of Christians. Ecumenical dialogues have provided an opportunity for the Lutheran churches to discern their joint understanding of being a communion in the ecumenical movement. We are called to continue the search for Christian unity—locally, regionally, and globally. Furthermore, we are called to understand more deeply how God calls us to transcend all human-made barriers that keep us apart from one another. God's liberating grace sheds a new light on our shared humanity with others and the deep interrelatedness with all of creation.

Being in communion is never an end in itself; it is God's work to give glory to God's name in a world thirsting for healing and transformation, for justice, peace, and reconciliation.



Appendices

Appendix 1 – Messages from the Pre-Assemblies

Asia Pre-Assembly: 15–19 August 2016, Bangkok, Thailand

We are the 93 participants—including delegates lead by LWF President Bishop Munib Younan, General Secretary Rev. Martin Junge, DMD Director Rev. Fidon Mwombeki, stewards and LWF staff, from 19 countries gathered together from August 15th to 19th 2016, for the Asia LWF Pre-Assembly in Bangkok, organized by the Asia Desk of the LWF Department for Mission and Development (DMD) and hosted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thailand.

In preparation for the Twelfth LWF Assembly in Windhoek, Namibia, 2017, and for the commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, we reflect on the theme ‘Liberated by God’s Grace’ from the perspectives of the diverse contexts in Asia. We commence our reflections with the sub-themes ‘Salvation not for sale’, ‘Human Beings not for sale’, ‘Creation not for sale’ and extend these to re-examine our values and practices within the Church and society. At the pre-assembly, we also engage in a wide range of programs and activities. However, the more important task is to seek to articulate the message of God’s liberating grace for the next decade, as we enter into another 500 years of continuing reformation.

1. ‘Liberated by God’s grace’ from the Asian Perspective

We recognize that the LWF was formed in response to human suffering. Today we, as churches in Asia, are facing common issues and challenges such as poverty, discrimination, violence against women and the vulnerable, refugees, consumerism, individualism, destruction of our environment and donor-controlled ministries. We are the Church liberated by God’s grace. People cannot be liberated by money, power or technology, but by the grace of God alone. Therefore, we cry out to God to strengthen us in spirit, to be able to share this holistic gospel; to empower us to help people in their suffering and poverty; and to recognize the giftedness of women and young people.

By the grace of God we have the Communion of Churches as a gift and have already begun the mutual sharing in altar and pulpit fellowship; bringing together our different and diverse gifts to bear witness to the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ; and sharing the confessional Lutheran foundations. The challenge now is to begin sharing beyond the traditional north – south relations, by extending it to south – south exchanges.

1.1 We join our voices to affirm— Salvation – Not for Sale

We understand that people in our region try to gain God’s favor through many different practices, including rituals and sacrifices; self-torturing; good works; education and

the like. These influence our Asian Christian practices. In Asia today, money, education, technology, modern culture, family, pastors, leaders, charismatic preachers, the gospel of power, Christian icons, liturgy, even Word and Sacrament – all these can be misunderstood and can become our idols. We also acknowledge that the issue of ‘prosperity gospel’ is a serious challenge to our churches, because it distorts the Good News of being liberated by God’s grace.

In our pluralistic religious contexts, we continue to affirm that the Word of God is the power of salvation. And our wholehearted acts of love, caring and sharing, flow from our experience of being liberated by God’s grace.

1.2 We join our voices to affirm— Human Beings – Not for Sale

We see sad and horrific situations in many countries in Asia, including incidents of human trafficking; rape; gender discrimination in work places; violence against women, children and other vulnerable people; and the abuse of power and financial resources.

We urge our churches to provide a prophetic voice by speaking out against such abuse, discrimination, violence and injustice.

1.3 We join our voices to affirm— Creation – Not for Sale

We recognize that Asia is the focus of rapid industrial advancement and consumerism, causing destruction of the environment and affecting people in many ways. Destructive behaviors such as disposal of industrial waste, mining, deforestation, nuclear power plants, acquisition of farm land and pollution of water sources, affect people’s lives and livelihoods now and into the next generations. We urge our churches to create awareness for environmental justice, for all ages, through education and action.

2. We join with the voice of women

Our sisters urge the Asian church leaders to take intentional actions to motivate and involve women in church leadership. They ask for fair selection processes and representation in all aspects of ministry and leadership: changes to the methodology of voting which are based on gender justice and equality; and which allow women to nominate and be nominated.

They recommend that the LWF Gender Justice Policy be translated and contextualized in every member church with a plan of action, which encompasses both men’s and women’s issues, and be implemented in every level that includes the LWF Assembly, LWF Council and the regional councils, in ensuring that every member church receives this policy with the recommendation that this is addressed in all sectors of church life and decision making processes. They further recommend that the churches be proactive in addressing all types of violence against women.

The sisters further encourage churches to embrace women who are doing theology to be recognized for their capabilities in the ministry. They re-affirm the goal, as stated in the past five consecutive LWF Assemblies, to include women in the ordained ministry. They further encourage the member churches that have yet to ordain women, to join their fellow churches in the Communion in doing so.

3. We hear the voice of youths

Young people are crying out in the midst of a confusing and rapidly changing world, seeking inclusion and integration into church life. They show their deep interest and commitment to work together with others in their churches to find solutions to many issues, such as: detachment from the worship life of the congregations, gap between rich and poor, politics and climate change. They want to be part of the solution.

Therefore we affirm and support the development of the Asia Lutheran Youth Network (ALYN) which was formed at the ACLC 2015. We encourage youth leaders to engage in the ALYN.

We join our voices together with the youths at the pre-assembly to sing their song, 'Liberated by God's grace to change the world!' The message of liberation by God's grace can reach more people when we communicate face to face and or through the expanding range of social networks.

4. Vision for the future

As Lutherans in Asia, we see a communion of churches where our Lutheran identity, formed by God's liberating grace, is understood and lived out in the lives of all believers in the church and society. Our freedom in Christ is the Good News which unites us all. We are called to share this message with all people.

Latin America and the Caribbean Pre-Assembly: 28 August – 2 September 2016, Paramaribo, Suriname

The delegates of the Lutheran World Federation member churches in Latin American and the Caribbean churches have gathered to prepare for the Twelfth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation to be held in Windhoek, Namibia in 2017, year of the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

We have had the joy of meeting with brothers and sisters of the North America region, with whom we had our pre-assemblies simultaneously, sharing devotional and celebratory time and moments of study and fraternal communion.

We began the meeting recalling and reaffirming the diaconal, missionary, theological and ecumenical vocation LWF originally registered.

We reaffirm that being free by Grace calls us to be a Communion working for justice, peace and reconciliation. And this connects us to the global nature of the reform, which is a "global citizen" and not property of Lutherans.

We joyfully checked the progress done regarding the proportion of participation of women in instances of deliberation and decision in the Communion, as well as the challenge to be a church in constant reform.

We therefore reaffirm the ecumenical and inter-religious responsibility of Communion, which has found expression in the pardon request to the Mennonite community and in the move from conflict to communion in our relations with the Catholic Church. We celebrate these testimonies of unity as reconciled and diverse communities in the midst of a fragmented world.

We recognize the challenges that our churches face in achieving sustainable development, and reaffirm that interdependence and mutuality are an inseparable part of a sustainable communion. In a broader spectrum; the emergence of climate change and environmental damage forces us to address it in a framework of interdependence and mutuality, which certainly includes intergenerational solidarity. We celebrate the diversity of knowledge that enriches the experience and collective responses to these challenges.

We also express our pain and our solidarity with refugees and displaced persons caused by both: the situations of violence and deterioration of their environment. We are sure that the Lutheran Communion, precisely because it emerged as a tool to assist displaced persons after II World War, cannot ignore the fate of migrants and displaced people today.

We, the churches shared our work during this time, and the challenges we face in the call to respond to the needs of our context in fidelity to the Gospel. There, we verified

important coincidences in our agendas and challenges: The relevance of diakonia as part of integral mission, the common pursuit of sustainability, and the rich contribution provided by participatory strategic planning to healthy governance.

Ongoing initiatives in each country preparing for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation were also shared without dismissing the challenges that will be waiting for us on 1 November 2017, when the lights go out and the celebrations and commemorations are completed.

The pre-assembly devoted time to consider what it means to live as communion through the reading the “Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion” document. After reflection on this material, it clearly emerged that communion is certainly a gift. But it is not a simple gift. Therefore, it was considered essential for the health of the Communion that all parts take serious responsibility of mutual accountability in decision-making processes and its results. To take part in a common table means that no party can or should simply modify the agreements that were reached collectively. The franc, intentional and sustained dialogue is essential for the life of communion.

Free by the grace of God

The path to Windhoek led churches to deepen the theme of the Twelfth Assembly. These considerations led us to affirm dialogue as a condition for freedom, and as an act of resistance against the logic of hegemony. Our reflections have challenged us to encourage in dialogue with different people and to be alert when dialogue is only done between equals.

We understand that freedom also means that we are free to love and embrace the church that really exists, more than comfortable idealizations about church. But we are also challenged to

recognize what practices in our churches should be called to repentance and transformation.

Salvation, creation, and human beings are not for sale!

Reflection on these statements pointed to see how our consumer societies and unacceptable inequality can consistently link to concepts like “sustainable” and “sufficient”. We recognize that we are responsible to care for creation and not the owners. Therefore, we denounce that those who sell what are not theirs, they are stealing.

Secularized and disenfranchised societies where we must bear witness to the grace challenge us to rethink what we mean when we speak of salvation, and to recognize that we do not always manage to share this Good News in a language that is challenging and understandable that appeals to people.

Our way to Namibia

The churches of the Lutheran Communion in Latin America and the Caribbean denounce the painful reality of millions of enslaved people by unjust economic models. We are urged to live the gospel of Jesus Christ defending the human rights, especially the rights of indigenous communities, migrants, and victims of trafficking. We also call to work for gender justice, creating mechanisms of implementation and contextualizing of the Gender Justice Policy of the Lutheran World Federation and promoting mutual accountability. We commit to the care of creation and commitment to climate justice. We stress that a fundamental tool to advance on these tasks is the access to theological education faithful to the Word, confessional solid, and contextualized in our realities.

It is our duty to express our deep concern about the deterioration of democratic processes, the situation of the human rights and rights’ defenders. This process began

in Honduras and Paraguay, and recently intensified with the rupture of democracy in Brazil and the difficult situation in Venezuela.

We also ask the Twelfth Assembly to consider organizing a working group to study all aspects of women in the ordained ministry. As churches in Latin America and the Caribbean we affirm that not step back on the agreements reached in this regard should be taken.

We want to express our gratitude to the Evangelic Lutheran Church in Suriname (ELKS) for receiving us so warmly and for letting us to know their challenges and the rich cultural diversity of the context in which they announce the freedom for all including freedom for creation by God's Grace.

North America Pre-Assembly: 28 August – 2 September 2016, Paramaribo, Suriname

We, as delegates from North America, are grateful to have joined together for the first time with the Latin America and Caribbean region for our pre-assembly in Paramaribo. This was an historic event as our two regions worked to prepare for our Assembly in Windhoek, Namibia, in 2017 under the theme "Liberated by God's Grace" with the three sub-themes of salvation, human beings, and creation not for sale.

We give thanks to our host church, the Evangelisch Lutherse Kerk Suriname (ELKS), the Rev. Marjory Slagtand, President of the ELKS, Henk Rahan, ELKS Pre-Assembly Commission Chair, for inviting us to participate and welcoming us with warmth and hospitality. We express our gratitude to the Rev. Dr Patricia Cuyatti, Area Secretary for Latin America and the Caribbean, for her work in coordinating the joint meeting of our two regions. It was truly a gift to gather together, to worship and to pray, to hear one another's stories, to learn, and also to be challenged by one another.

The movement of peoples— refugees, migration, and human trafficking

As we engaged the theme and sub-themes together, we acknowledge the neoliberal and free-market economic system as a root cause of the movement of peoples today. We recognize that we are accountable to our neighbors in the beloved community both through things done and left undone. War, environmental degradation, natural disasters, human exploitation, and injustice have created the largest migrant crisis since World War II. We have a responsibility to welcome migrants and refugees and to work to end the international and intra-national crime of human trafficking, which is one form of modern day slavery. Together we work toward peaceful and just societies

Right relationship and human community

As Lutherans living into our baptismal covenant, we are empowered by God's righteousness and called to live in right relationship with our neighbor. Racial justice, gender justice, full participation of youth and young adults, and indigenous rights will continue to be key concerns in our work as churches. We need to acknowledge and repent of the harm done by colonization and continue in the work of reconciliation.

Environmental justice

We recognize the urgent need to care for God's creation. As disproportionate consumers of natural resources, we must work actively to ensure clean, accessible water for all, mitigate land and soil pollution, manage waste appropriately, and implement solutions for sustainable energy sources. We are called to be caretakers of the earth and to listen to the wisdom of indigenous persons related to life on the land.

Leadership

We affirm the LWF for fully embracing the call of baptism as the priesthood of all believers,⁸⁹ and hope for a deepened emphasis on the ministry of all the baptized alongside that of ministers of Word and sacrament and ministers of Word and service. In a time of rapid societal change, we need to envision and implement new ways of engaging in theological education and leadership formation, for both lay and ordained, that prepare leaders for the church of the future rather than the church of the past.

Governance and life in communion

In the spirit of a church that is *semper reformanda*, and recognizing the importance of structures of governance and organization in strengthening our life together and our public witness to the gospel as a communion, we recommend that the LWF:

1. develop a process for accompanying churches, especially in times of conflict, and a mechanism for consultation and discernment over issues of importance to member churches.⁹⁰

2. add gender justice to *Section III. Nature and Functions* of the LWF constitution, as follows:

[The Lutheran Federation]: furthers worldwide among the member churches diaconic action, alleviation of human need, promotion of peace and human rights, social and economic justice, gender **justice**, care for God's creation and sharing of resources;

3. examine issues of fair voice and participation of all members of the communion through our governance structures, including the composition and design of the LWF regions.

4. consider the matter of dual membership in ILC and LWF and how it affects our self-identity and life as a communion.

In deep gratitude for the rich theme of the 12th Assembly, "Liberated by God's Grace," and the sub-themes emphasizing that salvation, human beings, and creation are not for sale, we challenge ourselves and the communion to implement a life of "not for sale" in our home contexts, living fully into our freedom in Christ to love and serve the neighbor.

Europe Pre-Assembly: 31 January – 3 February 2017, Höör, Sweden

In preparation for the 12th Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Namibia in May this year, delegates and advisers of the three European regions met in Höör, hosted by the Church of Sweden.

The sermon 'Recognised by his wounds', in the opening worship guided participants through the meeting. Archbishop Antje Jackelén preached on John 20:19-31, the story of the disciples encountering Christ appearing in the meeting after resurrection.

Her message was: standing before God (Coram Deo) we turn to the human needs. Liberated by God's grace, a communion in Christ living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world.

There is more to being sent than being excellent and doing great. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," means that there are going to be wounds. We are always going to be hurt and wounded, and we will make others feel wounded. Maybe in the time ahead more than before, since four dangerous P's are affecting our countries these days, and hence also our churches: *polarization, populism, protectionism*

and, with the word of the year 2016 (according to Oxford Dictionary), *post-truth*. We will have to resist, and thus we will feel the pain of our own wounds as well as the pain of others' wounds.

We as churches will respond to the four P's as follows: we will proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ bringing people together, being on eye-to-eye level with a person, meeting others beyond borders and listening to the contextual stories, speaking out to each other, even when the content is uncomfortable. Churches should not contribute to fear but be a positive force to meet the fear that we know that people are struggling with.

Overall churches should continue their longstanding effort to communicate and educate. We as churches have a long experience in living together and act in solidarity (conviviality). Yet we recognize that Europe is not a homogeneous unity both in the secular as well as in ecclesiastical world. When looking self-critical at the current state of Europe, national boundaries could enhance a risk. It is a chance for the churches to overcome nationalism and those borders: Europe is much more than the European Union.

Together with the women in our churches (Women in Church and Society) we state that churches should condemn all types of violence against women, men and children and affirm the dignity of all human beings created in the image of God. Churches can play a positive role in promoting justice and building bridges of reconciliation between different religious and ethnic groups. Ordained ministry and leadership are a call from God, both women and men are called.

We are reminded that Christ has redeemed the whole world not just humans, the earth is the Lord's. Salvation cannot be earned by work or deeds, we receive it by grace. Through gratitude for that gift we are freed to take action for the caring of creation.

Our overall strong recommendation is to develop robust ethical guidelines in order to unpack the not-for-sale themes: salvation, creation, human beings.

Some remarks to the subthemes:

Salvation—Not for Sale: We will proclaim the liberating gospel of Jesus. The doctrine of justification is fundamental to our Lutheran heritage. We are saved and receive our dignity not by our own acts, but by the grace of God. The gift of salvation needs to be rediscovered. Thus it can call people to believe in God. There is an increasing pressure especially on young people in society of 'not being good enough'. We as churches have to show and to practice what salvation can look like also as a daily experience in life. So that we are freed and loved.

Creation—Not for Sale: In the light of ongoing Reformation of the church (*semper reformanda*) we respond to fundamental questions of human life and develop spiritual and practical guidelines in order to overcome consumerism and materialism. We as LWF want to work on ourselves and rethink our consumption patterns in order for LWF churches to become role models for sustainability and for the accountable treatment of God's creation.

Initiatives on local and congregational levels that aim a change in attitude should be encouraged and supported. Special focus should continuously be set on issues in regard to climate justice.

Human beings—Not for Sale: In the light of the crucified Lord we are freed. Even though it seems as if every human being has a price-tag in today's economic system. The pressure for rising profits due to the financialisation of the economy is leading to the growing mistreatment of people. Human beings are being exploited for economic reasons. And this leads to trafficking and the growing marginalization of people with

disabilities, older people, and many more. We see the rising inequality in the world as a challenge to the churches and the LWF.

We ask the LWF to provide a framework and facilitate a process, to analyze what it means to live in significantly changing societies like Europe, in order to share our prayers, vulnerability and strengths, listen, learn, seek council with each other, discuss theology and envision reformation as on-going as faithful disciples of Jesus in our time.

We experience the LWF as a growing communion of churches and therefore we would wish to begin to explore whether the time is right to rename ourselves as a communion.

With so many people displaced and uprooted as refugees, asylum seekers or migrants we as European churches are called to recognize, welcome and support them. We call upon ourselves to partner with newcomers and migrant churches, as well as with people who are homeless or unemployed.

We continue to pray for those persecuted because of religion in all parts of the world, especially for Christians in Syria and other countries in the Middle-East. Freedom of religion and belief should apply for all.

We are looking forward to meet the worldwide Lutheran communion in Namibia and to joyfully mark 500 years Reformation together; harvesting the fruits of the liberation by God's grace.

Africa Pre-Assembly: 6–10 February 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa

“From his fullness we have received, grace upon grace” (Jn1:16).

Preamble

We representatives of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Member churches in Africa, in preparation for the LWF 12th Assembly and the celebration of 500 years of the Reformation in Windhoek Namibia, held our pre-assembly at the Premier Hotel, Johannesburg, South Africa, from 6-10 February 2017, under the theme “Liberated by God's Grace”.

We appreciate the presence of the LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr. Martin Junge, former LWF Vice President for Africa Ms. Angelene Swart, former LWF Vice President for Africa who is currently the Namibian Minister of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare Bishop Dr. Zephaniah Kameeta, former LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko and former LWF DMD Director Rev. Dr. Peri Rasolondraibe. We were equally blessed and appreciated the presence of ecumenical guests, particularly the moderator of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Central Committee, Dr. Agnes Abuom and a salutation visit by representative of the Minister of Social Development and the Religious Relations of South Africa Ms. Mayathula Khoza and other guests.

We had diverse presentations and reflections on different aspects of the three sub themes of the 12th Assembly – “Salvation – Not for Sale”; “Human Beings – Not for Sale”; and, “Creation – Not For Sale”. We also received messages from the Women and Youth delegates at the pre-assembly.

We appreciate the opportunity for fellowship and to be nourished spiritually through Worship with Holy Communion, morning and evening devotions, bible studies, songs and prayers. Hence our pre-assembly was filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The message of liberation by God's grace evokes in us, a response of gratitude to care for one another and the whole creation.

We acknowledge and strongly affirm the work of the LWF in responding to global human suffering and the accompaniment of member churches in their various contexts.

We discussed at length several issues particularly affecting Africa but also the world at large and resolved as follows:

Commercialization and commoditization of creation

We noted with deepest concern that human life and creation is increasingly commoditized and commercialized for selfish reasons. In this way, every dimension of creation entrusted unto us and human life is endangered. It is disturbing that even the message of God's grace and the ministry of the church are being commercialized as though it is something for sale.

We therefore,

- Decry the excess destruction of natural resources including the misuse of land for commercial purposes only, declaring that human destruction of creation is self-destruction because humans are inseparable part of creation.
- Are concerned with the notion of carbon emission compensation, whereby people could pay for the pollution they make, that is to say, pollution is now permissible. We call for the prevention of such emissions.

Mission work/decline of Christianity

- We noted the concerns expressed about the decline of the church in the Western world and the increasing level of negative consequences of secularization on the

Gospel message and ask for prayers on these developments.

- At the same time, delegates called the attention of African churches to the developments in the Western world and what lessons to learn from their struggles.
- We commend the efforts of some churches to start mission work and accompany sisters and brothers in the West.

Theological education

We noted the urgency to bring contextual realities and contemporary issues into theological training and ministerial formation in Africa. Pastoral formation today must integrate the social, political and economic dimensions and the changing landscape of theology. Content training within the classrooms needs to be strategically connected to the life of the congregations. We further observed with concern the decline in number of students willing to engage in pastoral training particularly due to economic reasons.

We therefore,

- Call on member churches to critically re-examine their models and systems of theological education and ministerial formation.
- Encourage theological networking in the Communion and ecumenically.
- Urge member churches to motivate pastors and take due regard of their welfare.
- Advise churches to strengthen efforts at local resources mobilization for institutional sustainability.

Refugees

It is with great sadness we noted that some of the countries of the world are today too busy building walls of separation and refusing to welcome refugees. Equally we noted with great sadness that even within the Africa region people are denied the possibility of movement between countries.

We therefore,

- Acknowledge and commend the Communion Office for the good work amongst and for the refugees and the displaced people regardless of their religious affiliations.
- Commend African countries that open their borders to receive refugees and displaced people.
- Call upon the USA, France, UK and other European countries to open their borders and build bridges to welcome the refugees, remembering that they were also refugees at one time or another and still could become refugees themselves.
- Strongly condemn the unabated annexation of Palestinian land by Israel. We see and understand it to be an effective means of robbing herself of a two-state co-existence. We call upon the Israeli government to respect the 1967 border agreements.
- Call upon African Union leaders to allow free movement of people and goods within the continent.
- We remind the governments of their responsibilities and commitments to protect, promote and fulfil their obligations under international law in international treaties.

- Call upon Churches to raise awareness concerning the perils of irregular, unnecessary migration and accompanying the returnees to restart their life.

Women's message

We noted that women's ordination continues to be a challenge. While acknowledging that a lot of progress has been made, yet the journey continues. As a gift for the church we also noted that in many places, they are ordained but not really allowed to exercise their pastoral ministries in the parishes.

We therefore,

- Urge churches to continue ordaining women and support them to carry out their ministerial services.
- Advise churches to seriously support theological education for women.
- Encourage churches to promote Gender Justice in Church and Society and the inclusion of women in leadership.

Youth message

We were challenged by the message of the youth who pleaded that the social evils they are struggling with should not only be left to the governments and secular organizations. We received with appreciation the report of LWF Africa Youth delegation to UN Conference of Parties on Climate Change and commend the LWF in supporting these initiatives.

We therefore,

- Call upon churches to step up action in addressing the social vices affecting the youth such as teenage pregnancy, alcohol, drug abuse, forced marriages, school drop outs, and poverty.

- Strongly advise churches to create space including intergenerational dialogue to engage and accompany the youth in dealing with these issues.
- Urge churches to develop mechanisms for strengthening youth leadership development and participation in the church.
- Remind African governments their obligation of ensuring the implementation of policies that create conducive environment for job creation, employment and entrepreneurship.
- Advise member churches to encourage and support initiatives aimed at building the capacity and participation of youth in addressing the challenge of climate change.

The reception of ecumenical agreements

We were reminded of the fact that “to be Lutheran is to be ecumenical.” Thus, we were inspired by the way the 500th Anniversary celebration of the Reformation is being commemorated ecumenically and jointly.

Hence we,

- Commend the LWF for the past and on-going ecumenical dialogues and various agreements reached.
- Appreciate ongoing theological dialogues between Lutherans and Roman Catholic and other denominations.
- Rejoice at the ecumenical celebration of these agreements at grassroots level, making it a reality in their daily lives.
- Encourage churches to sensitize and support members in general on these ongoing dialogues.

Peace, justice, and reconciliation

We were so distressed at the increasing level of violence globally and in Africa in particular, some of which even happen within the churches. We declare that human life is sacred, thereby rejecting any form violence and injustice.

We therefore encourage,

- The churches to prioritize issues of peace and justice in their work.
- Member churches to stand strongly against the injustices promoted by any government, religious body or out laws.
- Churches to be the voice for those whose voices are not heard or ignored.
- Member churches to work out processes of conflict resolutions and training.
- Churches to strengthen interfaith relations through inter-religious dialogues for sustainable peace building.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

We welcome the UN initiatives through the SDGs and appreciated LWF efforts to sensitize and accompany its member churches to clarify their roles in implementing these goals. We see these goals having direct connection to the biblical mandate to care for creation and humanity that the churches have been carrying out through history, many of our church programmatic work today and the LWF 12th Assembly theme.

We therefore,

- Strongly advise member churches to integrate these goals into their diaconal services.
- Encourage the LWF to step up efforts in building the capacity of member churches

in implementing and monitoring the SDGs in partnership with governments and civil society organizations.

Concluding remarks

We appreciate and applaud the LWF communion office support and accompaniment towards organizing this pre-assembly. We commit

ourselves to the implementation of these proposals in partnership with governments, ecumenical partners and other civil society organizations.

Liberated by God's Grace, we entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit to enable us remain firm in the faith in Christ and the care, healing and reconciliation of the whole of creation.

Appendix 2 – Statement on Mission

LWF Consultation on Contemporary Mission in Global Christianity, Geneva, 16–19 November 2016

The LWF has always seen mission as at the core of its identity and mandate since the gospel is the power of God for salvation to all (Rom.1:16)

The LWF reaffirms its understanding of participating in God's mission holistically as encompassing proclamation, diakonia (which includes development) and advocacy.

We acknowledge a great treasure of decisions, resolutions and resources and recommendations by different LWF governing bodies concerning mission. These are still relevant today even though in many contexts they have not been fully realized. We encourage all member churches to make good use of the resources available and accessible at LWF Communion office.

We also acknowledge the rapidly changing global and local contexts and their impact on doing mission. As we commemorate 500 years of Reformation we are aware of the fact that all churches are facing opportunities and challenges of different kinds in relation to, e.g.

- Lutheran identity and theological formation
- charismatic movement and Lutheran churches
- secularism and declining churches,
- religious pluralism and fundamentalism
- polarization and division in society
- proclamation and discipleship
- advocacy, diakonia, (and development) in the present context
- migration (e.g. immigration, emigration, integration, displacement, refugees)
- youth in mission
- women and men in mission
- prosperity gospel and theology of glory
- communication as strategy and as a means

As churches in ongoing reformation we call on each member church of the LWF to rethink its being church in its context and its role in God's mission. LWF is asked to provide accompaniment in this process, e.g. modeling, analyzing contexts, encouraging, enabling exchanges, etc. Each church has responsibility to equip each of its members to fulfill the expectation of the Lord: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect"(1 Pet 3:16)

We understand the mission of God as relational. We call on LWF to continue and intensify its responsibility to convene, coordinate and enable mission cooperation and mutual accompaniment between different member churches, including their related agencies engaged in holistic mission.

Appendix 3 – The Church in the Public Space: A Statement of the Lutheran World Federation

This public statement was received by the Council of the Lutheran World Federation in June 2016

1. Lutherans affirm the call to public engagement

On the occasion of the 500 Anniversary of the Reformation, the Lutheran communion seeks to claim the church's public engagement as a vital element of what it means to be Lutheran. Public engagement is the church's ongoing response to the freedom that is ours in Christ to love and serve the neighbor. The Reformation clearly expressed that this freedom emerges from the salvation by grace through faith.

At a time in which the role and authority of religion is debated, we articulate why and how as Lutherans we are present and active in the public space. As we look toward the future as a global communion, we respond to the call to a more profound presence in the public space.

Christians are shaped by the gospel message. God's liberating power transforms us to live a life that reflects the good news of Jesus Christ. In Christ God embraces our fragility, suffering and sin and brings human existence into new life (Phil 2). Baptism is the anchor for Christian life and Christian public engagement. The Bible calls us to be ready to respond to anyone who demands us to account for the hope that is within us; and to do so with gentleness and reverence (1 Pet 3:15f). Baptism implies a vocation to a life in faith, hope and love (1 Cor 13:13), ready to care for the well-being of all.

Christian communities have a public dimension, as they are called by God to be transformative agents in the world (Rom 12:2).

Churches and congregations are called to move beyond their institutional comfort zone and prophetically to dwell amidst the cries and hopes that fill their local and global contexts. Thus, when churches isolate themselves from the broader concerns of their societies they betray their calling to be salt and light to the world (Mt 5:13-16).

2. Lutherans are committed to strengthening public space as a just place for all

We envision public space as a just place for all and affirm our commitment actively to contribute to such a space. Three important elements characterize public space as a just place for all: (a) equal access to common goods and political decision-making processes; (b) safety, especially for the vulnerable; and (c) meaningful participation of and interaction among all groups of society.

Social empowerment takes place when groups, traditionally excluded from social, political and economic processes, make their voices heard and have their claims publicly addressed and therefore are able to contribute to the development of public policies and cultural transformation.

3. Lutherans affirm the public role and responsibility of religious communities

Against tendencies to limit religion to the private realm and to withdraw into enclosed communal spaces, we affirm that religious communities have a public role in society.

They actively contribute to the common good by sharing their spiritual visions and values, articulating their understanding of a just and peaceful society, advocating against oppressive structures and serving people in need.

Such a public role entails the responsibility to order one's affairs in accountable and transparent ways, both in institutional matters and in matters of theological teaching. Lutherans are acutely aware of human fallibility and sin, also within the church. Because of this the church cannot claim a superior position in the public discourse. The gospel word brings life to the world and the church is an instrument through which the gospel is heard. Therefore, the church is called to engage critically and self-critically in this world.

4. Lutherans emphasize the distinction between the worldly and the spiritual realms

When claiming active presence in the public space, it is helpful to distinguish between the worldly and the spiritual realms. According to Lutheran theology, in the worldly realm, laws are used to order society so that all people may live together in peace. At the heart of the spiritual realm stands the sharing of the good news of God's deep love for this world. Proclaiming God's mercy is an essential mark of our church and one of our contributions to the public space.

Lutherans advocate against the politicization of religion and the instrumentalization of politics by religious actors. Such dynamics distort the meaning and function of both realms, and become destructive for the whole of society. The church's task is not to dominate the public space but, rather, to warn against any worldview or religion, Christian or other, becoming an ideology that would dominate the public space. Lutherans underline the importance of freedom of religion or belief as a means to protect the

spiritual realm in people's lives from undue interference. Lutherans condemn any violence, domestic or public, and any hate speech perpetrated in the name of religion.

5. Lutherans acknowledge the public space as a shared space

In their societies, Lutherans live together with people of other religious traditions and convictions. Dialogue and cooperation are essential in order to create a participatory public space. As conflict stalks many societies, the church is called to walk the way of peace together with others and to build relationships of trust. The church is called to lead and serve processes of repentance, healing and forgiveness and jointly to walk new ways towards reconciliation. The church is actively involved in shaping a vibrant civil society and being part of networks of solidarity.

6. Lutherans affirm human rights as an important tool to enhance justice and peace

The Christian witness in the public space is primarily guided by assessing the consequences of political decisions for the most disadvantaged in society. As creatures of God, all human beings are created with equal dignity. Therefore the church is called to reevaluate cultural distinctions between center and margin, between powerful and oppressed, between low and high. In a plural and globalized world, human rights have become an important tool to enhance justice and peace.

7. Lutherans are committed to five key activities in public space:

- a) Assessing public issues in participatory ways
- b) Building relationships of trust
- c) Challenging injustice
- d) Discovering signs of hope
- e) Empowering people in need.

The ABCDE of the Church's Engagement in the Public Space

Assessing public issues in participatory ways

As many issues of public concern are quite complex and involve many actors, there is a need carefully to examine the issue in order to understand what is at stake. This includes listening to those affected by the issue and drawing on research in the field. In such discernment processes the needs and interests of different stakeholders need to be identified and the power structures involved carefully scrutinized. The church needs to be clear about its own relation to the matter at stake and seek ways to strengthen participatory assessment.

Building relationships of trust

Conflict situations haunt many communities in this world. The church is called to walk in the ways of peace with other actors in society and build relationships of trust. The church offers space for honestly dealing with the divisive realities. The church is called to lead and serve processes of repentance, healing and forgiveness and jointly to walk new ways toward reconciliation. The church invites to mutual accountability and responsibility and is actively involved in invigorating a vibrant civil society, and being part of networks of solidarity.

Challenging injustice

In the midst of complexities, the church unequivocally raises a prophetic voice when people's dignity is violated and basic human rights are infringed upon. At times the church can use established procedures to advocate for the marginalized and excluded, at others it

needs to find creative and extraordinary ways to address injustice. The gospel entails a clear vision of transforming oppressive structures and destructive systems. Christians are called to engage in politics, not for the sake of power, but for the sake of empowering those who suffer injustice. The church promotes the rule of law and good governance as highly important structural conditions for enabling justice and peace in society.

Discovering signs of hope

The church is a place that invites people to discover signs of hope and connect with God's deep love for this world. The church accompanies people on their spiritual journey as they, nurtured by God's Word, breathe hope through God's Spirit. The church connects with initiatives that radiate hope in society by opening up new possibilities there where people found themselves lost or hopeless. Pastoral care, diaconal initiatives and public engagement envisage alternative options there where people felt they were suffocating in destructive dynamics. Sharing hope is an important dimension of the church's public engagement.

Empowering people in need

The church is committed to strengthening people's agency so that they can live out their full potential in life. The gospel entails the vision that all obstacles that hinder people from fully participating in society be removed (Lk 4:18f.) The church is present with people in their suffering and listens to their plight. The church looks for ways to empower the weak and vulnerable through diaconal presence, education, advocacy and sometimes resistance movements. The church rejoices with people as they experience liberation and healing, as they find justice and peace and enjoy their dignity.

Appendix 4 – Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion: A Study Document⁹¹

The study document was received by the Council of the Lutheran World Federation in June 2015.

The Lutheran World Federation is a communion of churches that share pulpit and altar fellowship. They bring together their spiritual and material resources to participate in God's mission in the world. In light of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, the LWF wants to engage all the member churches in developing a more profound understanding of what it means to be an ecclesial communion in reconciled diversity.

According to the Lutheran understanding, the communion of the Church is given to us as a gift. But it is also a task. As a gift, communion comes into existence in hearing the Word and receiving the sacraments. Those who receive the Word embrace the task of following Christ. In following Christ the communion lives out the gospel in reconciled diversity.

The gift of communion

The LWF was founded seventy years ago. During the seven decades the self-understanding of LWF has undergone changes. What in the beginning was understood to be a loose association of churches has grown into a communion of churches. The history of the LWF is one of responding to the gift of communion. This has become evident especially during times when Lutheran churches have jointly responded to needs that exceed the capacity of individual churches and when they have jointly struggled to express their convictions. Since the 1990 Assembly in Curitiba, the LWF has explicitly been referred to as a communion of churches.

The language of communion refers back to the New Testament idea of *koinonia*. *Koinonia* is the communion of saints that share Word and sacrament, worship and prayer, and the various gifts of God. Within *koinonia*, people of different backgrounds are brought into a new relationship, characterized by participation in Christ.

The Church's unity is not unity in uniformity but in reconciled diversity. God's Spirit acts to strengthen the communion that is visible, diverse, and dynamic.

The task: discerning and living out communion

The self-understanding of the LWF reflects both the early structure of a federation of autonomous churches and a deepening accountability toward others as part of a communion of churches. Since the decision in 1990 formally to refer to the LWF as a communion of churches it has become clear that the churches' autonomy should be approached from the perspective of accountability. There is a clearer understanding of the interconnectedness between member churches. It also reflects a greater recognition of how particular communities are related to their immediate context, to each other, and how these relations affect one another. Each member church and particular ecclesial community exists in a unique historical, cultural, and political environment. In this diversity the theological and spiritual reality of communion unfolds. That the various expressions of the communion seek mutual recognition is one of the signs for the LWF's commitment to live in communion.

The shared decision-making bodies of the LWF include the Assembly, the Council, and the Meeting of Officers. As autonomous bodies, the member churches have their own, independent decision-making structures. In order to strengthen the communion, the LWF seeks to develop procedures for mutual consultation on issues where decisions by individual members may affect the relationship with other member churches. This implies in-depth discussion and assumes that all those involved are heard and that disagreements are duly noted.

While diversity is a healthy reflection of the commitment to faith and the gospel, certain differences may lead to disagreements that become harmful for the communion. A life in a communion that is both diverse and committed requires the availability of resources that help to discern between communion enriching and communion endangering diversities. Throughout its history the LWF has faced difficult discussions, some of which have in retrospect strengthened its self-understanding as a communion.

When discerning themes that may lead to discord the first question should be, How important is this theme? Does it compromise fundamental Lutheran preaching and teaching? Traditionally, Reformation theology has employed the concept of *adialora*, i.e., perceiving matters related to human traditions, rites, and ceremonies as something where uniformity is not required. It is not always easy to identify what belongs to the category of *adialora*. Also, some issues considered *adialora* may still carry such weight that churches cannot remain indifferent to them.

Lutheran churches share theological resources that orient the communion in its decision making. The following theological resources stand at the heart of Lutheran identity.

- The gospel is the core of our life in communion
- Word and sacraments are events of communion

- The message of the cross heals our brokenness
- The Word of God creates and affirms both unity and diversity
- The gospel entails freedom, respect and bearing with one another.

In deepening the communion, the LWF member churches are called to consider the following convictions and their implications:

1. As a communion of churches the LWF member churches are called to mutual accountability. This entails being open to receive gifts from the various traditions living within the Lutheran family of churches, pursuing better understanding of the various traditions, having the space and opportunity to ask other churches to explain their thinking and decisions, and committing to dialogue and discerning local practices together in light of shared theological principles.
2. As a communion of Lutheran churches, the LWF member churches share the principle of reading biblical texts from the core of salvation in Jesus Christ. This implies fostering joint ways of hearing the multitude of scriptural voices, understanding the contextuality of transmitting the Word of God, creating opportunities for joint critical hermeneutical work, and recognizing the importance of the Lutheran Confessions and their contextual reception.
3. As a communion of churches the LWF member churches are called to pay attention to the diversity of voices within the communion.

This suggests proclamation and pastoral care in ways that are inclusive and empowering; supporting teaching and pastoral practices that are inclusive and shaped by the gospel; drawing wisdom from and for ecumenical and interfaith relations; and welcoming the stranger even in ways that may expose one's own vulnerability.





Endnotes

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- 2 Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings, 1545," in *LW*, vol. 34, 337.
- 3 Bernd Oberdorfer, "How Do I Find a Gracious God?," in Anne Burghardt, *Salvation—Not for Sale* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2015), 14.
- 4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 47.
- 5 Martin Luther, *The Freedom of A Christian*, trans. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 50.
- 6 Au Sze Ngui, "Implementing Gender Justice: An Asian Perspective," in Anne Burghardt (ed.), *Liberated by God's Grace* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2015), 64.
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- 15 Luther, *op. cit.* (note 13), 58.
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- 18 Martin Luther, "The Magnificat, 1521," in *LW*, vol. 21, 300.
- 19 Luther, *op. cit.* (note 5), 50.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 83.
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- 22 Luther, *op. cit.* (note 5), 66.
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- 27 Message from the Lutheran World Federation International Conference "Global Perspectives on the Reformation. Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics," 28 October—1 November 2015, Windhoek, Namibia, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/message_from_the_conference_final_0.pdf
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- 31 *Towards a Convivial Economy. The Contribution of a Re-formed Community Diakonia in Europe* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2017), 8.
- 32 Tomas Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 89.
- 33 www.un.org/youthenvoy/2016/08/global-youth-unemployment-rise/
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- 52 Friederike Nüssel, "The Human Condition—a Lutheran Perspective," in Burghardt, op. cit. (note 42), 11.
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- 54 Ibid., 365.
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- 57 www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/
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“Liberated by God’s Grace.” What are we liberated from? What are we liberated to? What practices and concepts stand in the way of the gospels’ liberating message? These are just some of the questions that we will reflect on during this Assembly.



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