

# **THE ONGOING REFORMATION OF THE CHURCH: The Witness of Ordained Women Today**

*From 27-29 March, 2008, a small ad hoc consultation of women was held in Geneva, under the auspices of the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, in collaboration with the DMD Women in Church and Society Desk and the Office for Ecumenical Affairs, in order to assess the current situation with regard to the ordination of women in LWF member and associated churches, and its impact for wider ecumenical relations. Among the participants were lay and ordained women engaged in ministries of teaching, pastoring, administration and oversight. They came from different parts of Africa, Asia, Europe and North America, and received further input from women in Latin America and Australia, as well as from various documents and developments in the LWF and member churches over the past fifty years. This communiqué highlights some of their concerns.*

We gathered during the week of Christ's Resurrection, a time when the church remembers the witness of the women who came to the empty tomb and were sent to be the first proclaimers of the Good News, as all four gospels record (Mt 28:1-10; Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-11; Jn 20:11-18). Amidst our Alleluias, we also mourn that for too long this witness of faithful women could not be expressed through the church's ministry of Word and sacrament. Yet we rejoice that the Holy Spirit, who continues to renew and reform the church in every age, has in our time blessed an increasing number of churches through the ministries of ordained women as well as men.

## **I. CLAIMING THE NEWNESS OF THIS MOMENT**

The ordination of women as well as men into the ministry of Word and sacrament has been one of the most visible changes in most member churches during the sixty-plus years of The Lutheran World Federation. Thousands of ordained women are increasingly visible on all levels and in every facet of the church's work. Resistant attitudes and cultural assumptions are being transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit. Reception of the ministry of ordained women has been overwhelmingly positive.

Because of this positive reception, consideration of biblical texts or theological points now occurs in the context of churches' actual experiences with ordained women. Members and leaders of churches have been truly hearing the living Word of God in the preaching of women pastors, and receiving the real presence of the body and blood of Christ when Holy Communion is administered by them (cf. Augsburg Confession VII). Many thousands of Lutheran congregations throughout the world have thus received and been fed spiritually through the ministries carried out by these women. This witness in turn is being shared, as people move about, exchange and visit across cultural contexts, including where other churches or faiths are dominant.

At the same time, we hear the frustration of those who still struggle for women to be ordained in their churches but whose efforts continue to be blocked or resisted. Although in some places, the majority of theological students are women, in other places, especially where church doors remain closed to them, a declining number of women are pursuing theological studies. In far too many places, although policies and practices may have changed, women still confront unchanged attitudes and ethos, and at least passive resistance to their full

acceptance. Inequities in employment and remuneration still remain. As ordained women enter positions of oversight and leadership in their churches, they face new sets of challenges, especially in the use of power and exercise of authority. At all levels, models, training and resources still are needed for women and men to realize genuine partnership in ministry.

## II. AT THE HEART OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE THE CHURCH

We rejoice in the strong affirmation by the LWF Council in 2007:

Ordination of women expresses the conviction that the mission of the church requires the gifts of both men and women in the public ministry of word and sacraments, and that limiting the ordained ministry to men obscures the nature of the church as a sign of our reconciliation and unity in Christ through baptism across the divides of ethnicity, social status and gender (cf. Gal. 3:27-28).<sup>1</sup>

We view the ordination of women not primarily as a societal or women's issue but as a matter that goes to the heart of what it means to be the church. The church's witness to God's reconciliation and freedom in Christ is compromised when women are excluded from being able to serve as public witnesses to this by proclaiming the Word and celebrating the sacraments.

With those ecumenical partners who also ordain women, Lutherans join in articulating a vision of the church that welcomes these gifts as part of its witness, bringing to this our characteristically Lutheran emphases to understandings of church and ministry. With those partners who do not ordain women, we raise a vision of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church as a place where God calls both women and men to all its ministries, lay and ordained. We seek to remain in conversation about these matters, especially with those Lutheran churches that do not ordain women.<sup>2</sup>

For us Lutherans, the **Bible** is authoritative for our theological discernment, including with regard to the ordination of women. However, rather than focusing only on select passages, either in favor or in opposition, we call for a more comprehensive understanding of the witness of Scripture, as centered in Jesus Christ. We point especially to the Lutheran understanding of the living voice of the gospel (*viva vox evangelii*), as it is heard and embodied through the proclamation and ministry of women and men.

Many churches that ordain women recognize this today as an aspect of their **Lutheran identity**. It is a theologically based consequence of a Lutheran understanding of the church and the ministry. In insisting that every baptized person has a direct relationship with God and shares in the priestly character of God's people, Martin Luther overcame the spiritual hierarchy which tended to set the vocation of the ordained above that of other members of the church. This opened the possibility of welcoming all persons with appropriate gifts into the public ministry of the church, if practical considerations are addressed (such as access to theological education). Nothing in the Lutheran Confessions explicitly bars women from the ordained ministry. Instead, what is consistent with the Lutheran tradition is a church that is open to change and continually undergoing reformation (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est secundum Verbum Dei*).

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<sup>1</sup> "Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church. The Lund Statement," 26 March 2007 para. 40, p. 8, at [http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF\\_Documents/LWF\\_The\\_Lund\\_Statement\\_2007.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/LWF_The_Lund_Statement_2007.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> For more information see: [http://www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/DMD/DMD-WICAS.html](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DMD/DMD-WICAS.html)

Often, it is not theological but **cultural** reasons that stand in the way of women being ordained. This is especially the case where hierarchical and patriarchal practices are entrenched. In the gospels' accounts of Jesus' ministry, what is obvious is how he repeatedly challenged cultural assumptions and practices that excluded others, particularly women. He also challenged hierarchical patterns of religious leadership. The liberating power of the gospel continues to challenge such assumptions and practices today. A 1992 LWF consultation noted that often

[t]he problem lies not with the culture of the surrounding society but with a particular culture that has developed within the church.... After many decades, however, not only is that "church culture" foreign to the church in the countries from which it was imported, but it also becomes a barrier to evangelism locally.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, some churches do not want to discuss the ordination of women because they fear this may split the church or threaten ties with partners who oppose this. Churches need to have transparent processes of dealing with the differences that may be there. We believe that open discussions are needed in which local church members are made aware of the theological grounds for ordaining women, and not only the opposing perspectives. Furthermore, the actual experiences and effects that ordained women are having on the ministry and mission of the church throughout the world need to be heard by others for whom this may not yet be the practice. In the end, informed and open discussion is not likely to weaken but to strengthen the church's self-understanding and identity.

### III. THE CALL

Encouraging the ordination of women has long been an LWF commitment. For example, in 1990, the Eighth Assembly in Curitiba declared:

We commit ourselves and our member churches to intensify our efforts to be a sign of an inclusive communion in the world. To that end, we will work out a clear plan of action in every member church which fully expresses the equality of men and women within the life of the church and enables the churches to benefit from the potential which women are able to give to all areas of the church life. We will undertake, through consultation and cooperation of all member churches and in a climate of mutual respect, practical efforts to open the way for women to enter the ordained ministry of all our member churches.<sup>4</sup>

Now, as we prepare for the Eleventh Assembly in 2010, in the spirit of what it means to be a communion of churches, we ask each of our member churches to consider how they have responded to this call and what in all our communities remains to be done. In particular:

As we anticipate a new and accessible LWF resource for use in local settings, we call on member churches to encourage local congregations to engage in educational discussion so that members can understand better the theological grounds for ordaining women.

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<sup>3</sup> "Ministry: Women, Bishops," *Report of an International Consultation*, 1992 (Geneva: LWF, 1993), para. 22, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> "I Have Heard the Cry of My People," Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly, *LWF Report 28/29* (Geneva: LWF, December 1990), p. 82.

We encourage churches, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to be open to hearing and learning from one another of the positive experiences, blessings and impacts ordained women are having on churches within and beyond the Lutheran communion, especially through exchanges and visits.

We call upon leaders of churches that do not ordain women to consider prayerfully the effect that inaction on this matter has on those women who are precluded from exercising their God-given calling because they are women. The pain of their exclusion and the loss of their gifts is suffering and loss that is experienced by the whole church.

We urge each member church to bring to the 2010 Assembly a report of what they intend to do with regard to this matter if they do not ordain women already, or, if they do so now, how they are addressing remaining practical obstacles and seeking to further the partnership of women and men in the ministry of the church.

Finally, we call for Reformation commemorations in 2017 in which the witness of women pastors and those in oversight positions will especially be raised up as a sign of the church's ongoing reformation.