

# REPORT OF THE GENERAL SECRETARY REV. DR ANNE BURGHARDT

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## 1. Introduction

- 1) I would like to begin this report with a word of gratitude to the LWF member churches that have continuously supported the work of the LWF and participated in the life of the communion, as well as to the Council members and advisers. As we meet here in Switzerland for the first full meeting of this Council, exactly 8 months have passed since the Thirteenth Assembly began. During those months many of you have participated in various LWF-related meetings. You have offered your wisdom and advice on how to best advance the life of our communion. I want to thank you for making yourselves available for this meeting, including joining the women's, men's and youth pre-Council meetings. In particular I want to mention the men's pre-council meeting which is the first of its kind, following the successful men's pre-assembly in Kraków.
- 2) At this Council meeting, you will take important decisions: approving the new strategy which sets direction for LWF during the upcoming strategic period; and appointing a number of task forces and study groups that will work on matters the LWF Assembly has requested. Through our work, we as LWF want to remain truthful to its four founding pillars: joint efforts in theology; joint search for Christian unity; joint efforts in mission and service to the people in need, "translating" them to the best of our abilities to address the urgent and diverse needs and contexts our current time.

- 3) The report that is before you covers the timeframe from the Thirteenth Assembly in September 2023 until the end of May 2024.
- 4) The report opens with a context analysis and continues with an overview of developments and activities in the main current strategic areas, as well as in the field of planning and operations, including the move of the Communion Office earlier this year. The report will conclude with a look ahead, towards the next strategic period. I will not dwell thoroughly on the new strategy but would like to encourage you to have a look at its final version as presented to you in a separate Council Exhibit 13.

## 2. The context we live in

- 5) In today's world, we see a constant interplay between global trends and local contextual realities. To learn more about the regional realities and concerns of the LWF member churches, we organized seven regional meetings with Council members and advisers in January. The meetings also served as part of preparing the LWF Strategy, by helping us analyze the global challenges and explore how to respond to them by sharing the gospel-based hope in words and deeds.
- 6) I want to open this report by quickly highlighting a few topics that stand out when describing the context in which we witness and work.
- 7) **The polarization of societies, erosion of democratic structures, and the instrumentalization of religion** has continued globally, and contributes to the general atmosphere of conflict. There is increasingly less willingness to carefully analyze the root causes of the current problems and find a reasonable solution that offers a constructive way forward. Around the globe, we continue to see the strengthening of authoritarian and populist regimes. They undermine the democratic foundation of human rights and international law that provide legal mechanisms for safeguarding human dignity and paths to find peaceful solutions to the conflicts. It is particularly dangerous when theologies and religious identity are radicalized along authoritarian and ethno-nationalist lines and are instrumentalized to promote respective economic and political ends. One of the more prominent recent examples for instrumentalization of religion is the adaptation by the Russian Orthodox Church of the term "Holy war" for the invasion war against Ukraine.
- 8) This turn towards authoritarianism presupposes and builds on a certain type of leadership which is top-down, avoids criticism and is unwilling to learn from feedback. This is neither in accordance with the principles of servant leadership that should characterize leaders in Lutheran tradition nor the principle of the priesthood of all believers.
- 9) Churches often in one way or another mirror the societies where they live and serve. At the same time, many churches are willing to raise their voice against the misuse of power and against ideologies that undermine human dignity. In view of the tendencies mentioned above, in several regional meetings, the following aspects were highlighted: the need for the church to offer an example for conducting respectful dialogue and to counter polarization; to recognize misleading theologies that aim at instrumentalization of religion and question the liberating message of the gospel; to raise prophetic voice against violations against human dignity; to enhance critical thinking, particularly in view of widespread fake news and still fully unforeseeable future impact of AI; the need to develop good governance.

- 10) **Increased number of conflicts and displaced people.** The year 2023 was one of the most conflict-ridden since the end of World War II. The war in Gaza began just a few weeks after we returned from the LWF Assembly; the war in Ukraine has continued and even escalated; Sudan's conflict has reached a stage where there around 8.4 million people internally displaced – the highest number recorded in the year; the conflicts in Ethiopia and Myanmar are ongoing. The list is much longer. In addition, we see large numbers of people on the move, forced to migrate from their home countries, whether because of conflict, persecution, climate change that makes vast areas uninhabitable, or due to an economic situation that has often become more difficult due to governments pushing neoliberal agendas. The increasing gap between rich and poor worldwide and the weakening of the middle class in many societies contribute to the sense of hopelessness and inclination to radical ideologies which lead to violent conflicts.
- 11) While observing the increased humanitarian needs, we also witness a significant decrease in the funding of humanitarian aid organisations. Given the current situation worldwide, it is even more relevant for the LWF to continue to provide support to the needy, which is an integral part of our DNA.
- 12) In several regional meetings, the **pushback against human rights of women** and their equal opportunities with men in many parts of the world were mentioned. This goes hand in hand with **increased gender-based violence** which is observed worldwide. In many contexts, gender roles are changing in society, but not everybody can cope with this.
- 13) Christianity and other religions can be misused to argue against women's rights and gender justice. In Christianity, this happens through a fundamentalist way of reading the Scriptures and/or interpreting tradition. At the same time, when the Scriptures are read with the interpretative lenses of the doctrine of justification by faith, the strong affirmation of equal dignity of all human beings, regardless of their gender, stands out. In line with this, churches can support their members to reflect how to handle the changing gender roles in today's societies, concentrating on the call bearing one another's burdens, and in this way fulfill the law of Christ (cf. Gal 6:2).
- 14) Many analysts forecast that in the coming ten years, the **climate emergency** will be one of the main global challenges. "Treat the Earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children." This Kenyan proverb is a good reminder of the far-reaching consequences of the climate emergency, but also of the responsibility of the current generations, those in positions of power, vis-à-vis the future generations. This topic was highlighted at most regional meetings, calling for the LWF to intensify its work in this field through advocacy, policymaking and sharing of good practices.
- 15) In the light of all the above-mentioned challenges in our world today, the LWF regions asked how to best serve God's people and the whole of creation under the current circumstances; how to offer a credible witness and share hope in times which may not seem the easiest.
- 16) The LWF member churches are growing in some parts of the world and either keeping the same level of membership or slightly declining in numbers in other regions. According to the most recent figures, LWF member churches bring together 78.3 million people. However, we must never forget that the vitality of a church doesn't primarily depend on the number of its members, but on the strength of its witness.
- 17) There is no one-fits-all solution to how to best share the gospel or raise the voice of the church in the public space. In some regions, e.g. Asia, churches have reported experiences of increasing

persecution with very limited opportunities to raise their voice in the public sphere. Many churches in Europe are looking for ways to address people whose families have been alienated from the church for a long time due to extensive secularism. In Africa, some churches struggle with young people being attracted to prosperity gospel.

- 18) However, one topic stands out as cross-regional, particularly when it comes to the **voice of the youth**: the longing of human beings for God who offers guidance yet is merciful and provides a purpose for one's life; and for a theology that offers a counter-culture voice to the constant demand to be successful, and gives an expression to God's call for unity, expressed through an experience of a community that is mutually caring, and exercising care for the whole creation.

### 3. Implementation of LWF's strategic priorities in the light of our current context

- 19) The LWF is a structurally rather unique global Christian communion. Through its Communion Office, it brings together communion relations between member churches, theological work, diakonia, advocacy, and humanitarian work. The LWF strategy for years 2019-2024, *With Passion for the Church and for the World*, has two main strategic priorities: a) Supporting churches' presence and vibrant witness in the world, and b) Promoting human dignity, justice, and peace.
- 20) In this report, I will begin with giving an overview of the developments and activities in the field of Communion Relations and Ecumenical Relations, thus concentrating on the mutual relations of LWF members churches and on the search for Christian unity. From there I will continue with the overview of the activities that have taken place in the two strategic areas.

#### 3.1 Communion relations

- 21) Connecting member churches to each other and fostering regional and cross-regional communion relations remains one of the relevant tasks of the LWF. The last Assembly was an important momentum in the life of the Communion, with member churches gathering from across the world. Regular in-person meetings of representatives from LWF member churches remain important, as they contribute to creating and fostering relationships.
- 22) The Regional Secretaries continued to accompany member churches since the Assembly, conducting a number of solidarity visits, identifying the specific needs in their respective regions; informing the global communion about the newly elected leaders; bringing to the attention of the whole communion the damages caused by conflicts and natural catastrophes to churches in many parts of the world, calling for prayers and support. The Regional Secretaries remain an important link between the church leadership in the regions and the Communion Office. Here I would also like to use the opportunity and draw your attention to a new appointment among the Regional Secretaries: after the resignation of Rev. Dr Philip Lok in March this year, Rev. Dr Rospita Siahaan from Protestant Christian Batak Church (HKBP) in Indonesia has been appointed Regional Secretary for Asia as of June 1.
- 23) Regional Secretaries have also accompanied the President and me during our visits to member churches. After the Assembly, I visited LWF member churches in El Salvador and Honduras (Salvadoran Lutheran Church and the Christian Lutheran Church of Honduras) in conjunction with the visit to the LWF Central America program in October 2023; the LWF member churches in

Indonesia in November 2023; the Evangelical Church in Jordan and the Holy Land in April 2024 and the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine in May 2024. The LWF President conducted his first official visit in office to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in April this year. It was followed by a visit to Ukraine. Several news releases and social media posts were issued on these occasions, informing about the encounters and the topics that were discussed during the visits.

- 24) At this Council meeting, an application of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia for direct membership in the LWF will be presented to the Council. Similar to the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine, this church used to be a member of the LWF through the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Russia and Other States (ELCROS). In September 2021, well before the war in Ukraine the prospect of direct membership in the LWF for churches belonging to ELCROS was given to the respective churches. The reason is that these churches are registered as independent churches in their respective countries and membership through the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Russia and Other States can thus be seen as a remnant of the early post-Soviet era. So far, the churches in Ukraine and Georgia have been received into direct membership in the LWF. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia which currently serves under very difficult circumstances yet has managed to avoid publicly approving the war against Ukraine, has now followed the suit and applied for direct membership in the LWF. The documents will be submitted to the Standing Committee for Constitution and Membership.
- 25) Already some time ago, we received rather unsettling news from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ghana about their intention to leave the LWF. However, to date no formal request in the form of a letter to the General Secretary has been submitted to the Communion Office and we are still waiting for the response of the church to the offer to conduct an accompaniment visit to the church by the Vice President and the Regional Secretary for Africa region. The church has close connections to the International Lutheran Council and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.
- 26) In 2018, the annual talks between the LWF and The International Lutheran Council (ILC), a fellowship of Lutheran churches with the biggest member church being the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) in the US, were suspended by my predecessor Rev. Dr Junge. There have been reflections about resuming these annual meetings. Even if the LWF and ILC will remain on different positions when it comes to women's ordination, understanding of hermeneutics etc., it would be important to express our mutual concerns through in-person meetings. This is particularly important in view of a recent untruthful presentation of LWF and its history in an LCMS publication *The Lutheran World Federation Today: Missio Dei, Imago Dei, and the Ongoing Reformation*. The argument presented in this booklet suggests that the LWF has lost its confessional moorings because it has lost "the message of the very Gospel of Christ (...) the forgiveness of sins achieved by Christ's atoning death and resurrection." The author, Rev. Dr. Jonathan Shaw creates a fake narrative of LWF Assemblies reducing them to certain phrases taken out of context thereby "proving" his premise. The critical turning point according to Shaw was the Assembly in Evian (1970) when it opted for a "secular ecumenism" or earthly paradise rather than the "forgiveness of sins." The Assembly in Kraków was according to him a fine example of this loss as it focused primarily on "ensuring the fullness of diversity inside and outside the church; and invigorating ecumenism to include those in Christian churches, those in other faiths and those of no religion" (page 20). The booklet ends with an appeal to confessional Lutheran bodies within the LWF to leave and "touch no unclean thing" (2 Co 6:17-18).

- 27) This line of argumentation is not new. It is based in the old polemic concerning the interpretation of the Augsburg Confession and Luther's theology of justification by faith alone. The premise of the LCMS is that the 16<sup>th</sup> century debate on justification and the forgiveness of sins is the same one today. It ignores systemic evil. It ignores the more developed understanding today of the human person as person in community. It in fact ignores Luther's own broadening of the concept of the forgiveness of sins as reconciliation. Finally, it ignores the fact that "liberated by God's grace" is precisely the forgiveness of sins. I find it unsettling to see how much effort is put into spreading these untruths about the LWF and it doesn't leave a good impression of the LCMS, that they want to affirm and express their own identity by attacking others.
- 28) Currently, 14 LWF member churches are either members or associated members of the ILC. This fact was one of the initial impulses to start to develop the Mutual Responsibility Framework, a process initiated by the previous Council. That Council recommended that the development of such a framework be taken on by the Council elected at the Assembly in Kraków. Since the Assembly, with the support of a consultant, the mapping of concerns and expectations of the member churches about their mutual relations has been carried out, and the Council is asked to appoint a Task Force to develop a Mutual Responsibility Framework for its member churches. Note that the terminology was been changed from "mutual accountability" to "mutual responsibility" to avoid false connotations in other languages.
- 29) According to the LWF constitution member churches are autonomous in view of their decisions and the LWF has no jurisdiction, nor does it have decision-making authority over member churches. With the shift in the LWF's self-understanding, moving from a federation of churches towards a communion of churches (Curitiba Assembly 1990) the autonomy of LWF member churches becomes framed differently. New concepts emerge based on rich theological and spiritual insight such as interdependence between churches, their mutuality, their companionship in God's mission. The concepts have posed with increased urgency the question about the relationship between the churches' autonomy and their mutual accountability, insofar as they embrace and intend to express a new, deeper unity among them, while accepting each other's different contexts.
- 30) One of the main objectives of such a framework is to articulate a set of commitments to which LWF member churches are invited to adhere as they deepen their understanding and practices of communion relations. It is not about creating a legislative text. More information about the planned process and framework can be found in Exhibit 14 that explains the rationale for creating the Mutual Responsibility Framework.

### *3.2 Ecumenical relations*

- 31) Ecumenical relations have been part of the LWF's DNA since its foundation. This work requires commitment, a long-term perspective, and a focus on the goal.
- 32) In 2017 we marked 50th anniversary of **the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue** in addition to marking the 500th anniversary of the reformation. The dialogue commission has produced numerous significant documents during its more than 50 years of work, with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) being a highpoint. LWF holds regular joint staff meetings with the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity (DPCU). At the meeting in December 2023, it was decided to move forward with the Sixth Phase of the International Joint Commission on Unity in 2025 and we are currently finalizing the guidance text together with DPCU. One of the key tasks for the next commission will be to prepare a joint text for the 500th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. The

Council is asked to nominate the Lutheran Commission members for the next dialogue phase at its meeting.

- 33) It was a joy to be invited to participate in the ecumenical Vespers at St. Peter's Square in Rome on 30 September which was appreciated by many in the communion. The Vespers preceded the Synod meeting on Synodality. The LWF has been invited to participate in the second meeting of the Synod in October 2024 for which we are grateful.
- 34) **The Lutheran-Orthodox Commission** has similarly produced several statements through more than four decades of work. The Commission is currently in its 18th Session on the theme of Holy Spirit in creation, church, and world with a focus on the Epiclesis in the eucharistic prayer and the ways in which the life of the worshipping community is shaped. It has been very active recently and a preparatory meeting for the concluding plenary meeting of the 18th Session took place in Tallinn, Estonia, in November 2023. During the preparatory meeting, the Commission worked on a Common Statement on the filioque (one of the official reasons for the schism between Western and Eastern church in the 11th century), a clause that was added to the Nicene Creed, Nicaenum, claiming that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (Latin: filioque). The plenary meeting in Cairo in May concluded the 18th Session with a Common Statement on the Holy Spirit and a potentially historical Common Statement on the filioque. These statements will be presented to the Council through the Committee for Ecumenical Relations. The Common Statement on the Filioque has a potential to be truly ground-breaking.
- 35) **The Lutheran-Pentecostal dialogue** is the most recent dialogue, held with the representatives of classical Pentecostal movement. This dialogue began in 2016. The first dialogue phase explored Christian identity in light of Luke 4:18-19. It concluded in 2022 and the report was published just prior to the Thirteenth Assembly. The second dialogue phase will focus on worship and formation. The Council is asked to nominate the members for the next dialogue phase.
- 36) **The Anglican-Lutheran International Commission on Unity and Mission (ALICUM)** has a more "practical" mandate. Its aim is to bring together pairs of bishops and church leaders from both communions to strengthen cooperation in implementing already existing agreements and find new ways to serve and witness together. The second meeting of the Commission took place in Singapore with an initial sharing of results. A summit is planned for 2025 that will include not only the steering committee but the pairs of church leaders.
- 37) The **World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)** is preparing for its General Council in 2025. The LWF will be represented at that Council. The LWF and the WCRC are engaged on many levels. The two communions are currently working on drafting a statement on the Freedom of Religion and Belief. They are also both involved in NIFEA. The interim General Secretary Rev. Dr Setri Nyomi visited with the General Secretary and the Assistant General Secretary in early May 2024 to discuss ongoing collaboration.
- 38) As mentioned above, one of the highlights of Lutheran-Roman Catholic relations is the **Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and its development into a multilateral agreement**. What makes this statement significant in addition to its content is that it has since 1999 developed from a bilateral to a multilateral agreement. Three World Communions have joined the agreement: World Methodist Council (WMC) in 2006, the Anglican Communion (AC) in 2016, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in 2017. In 2019, all five World Communions issued the Notre Dame Consultation Statement. The ecumenical secretaries of the communions who have

joined JDDJ, and the General Secretaries of the LWF and WCRC, met in Bern in April and agreed on the way forward. During the meeting, the methodology of differentiated consensus, used in the JDDJ was affirmed, and it was agreed that theological reflections and liturgical materials to mark the agreement reached in JDDJ will be prepared and shared in 2025. The five communions also proposed to reflect more deeply on justification and its relation to baptism as the sacrament incorporating persons into the Body of Christ and into God's mission for justice, as well as the urgency to reflect upon how justification impacts public theology. The Institute for Ecumenical Research is currently planning a symposium at the end of 2024 to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of JDDJ.

- 39) In addition to these relations and dialogues, LWF continues to be strongly engaged with **multilateral ecumenism**.
- 40) The **Global Christian Forum** held its Fourth Global Gathering in Accra, Ghana in April this year. It brought together the widest range of ecumenical partners from Orthodox and Catholic to Pentecostal and Evangelical as well as African Instituted Churches, independent and migrant churches, megachurches and others. The LWF had 9 official delegates representing all our regions and youth. The LWF has supported the Global Christian Forum since its inception 25 years ago.
- 41) In May, good conversations took place with the representatives of **Faith and Order Commission** of WCC which is preparing for the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nicaenum in 2025.
- 42) The LWF also continues to be represented at the annual meetings of the **Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions** through participation of both the General Secretary as well as the Assistant General Secretary for Ecumenical Relations.
- 43) The ecumenical **Feast and the Mystery of Creation Conference** in March, organized by the Centro Laudato Si', brought together major world communions as well as the Orthodox Church to reflect on instituting a new Feast in the liturgical calendar – the Feast of Creation. The purpose of this feast is not only to highlight more prominently creation in our respective liturgies and spiritualities but to engage in theological reflection on the foundation for our commitment to climate justice and for our response to the climate crisis. The conference was attended by several Lutherans who met in caucus and discussed ways forward for this initiative within the LWF.
- 44) To enhance the reception of ecumenical dialogue documents, but also to advance ecumenism on regional and national level, we continue to work on forming the **LWF ecumenical network**, which will consist of representatives of member churches who are either responsible for ecumenical matters in their home churches or are in other ways deeply involved in ecumenism. Even the best ecumenical agreements don't take us further if they are not received and implemented by member churches and their partners.
- 45) Finally, I would like to mention the **Institute for Ecumenical Research (IER)** in Strasbourg. The Foundation for Interconfessional Research was created at LWF Assembly in Helsinki (1963). The Foundation then established the institute. This institute has been a primary driver in much of LWF's ecumenical work in the past. It is currently in a phase of renewal. The Institute took a major step forward in 2024 with the Board's decision for the Institute to become a registered association under French law which enables the institute to officially hire researchers from outside Europe. I am grateful that the Assistant General Secretary for Ecumenical Relations has been able to serve as an interim Director of the Institute, accompanying it in these complicated times.



### *3.3 Supporting churches' presence and vibrant witness to the world*

- 46) Although there are many interactions between different departments when implementing the strategic priorities, Department for Theology, Mission, and Justice (DTMJ) has primarily been responsible for implementing this strategic priority (for a more detailed report on the activities of DTMJ, see the CTMJ Report Exhibit 6).

#### *Theology for Transformation*

##### *Lutheran Identity*

- 47) The LWF Global Study Process on Lutheran Identity reached a significant milestone in 2023 with the publication of *Now there are varieties: A Study Document on Lutheran Identities in the Global Communion* which was made available by the time of the Assembly. Continuing from a foundational self-understanding of being Lutheran, our focus now shifts to a new study process on the *Theology of the Cross*, requested by the Assembly, while deepening a renewed emphasis on Confessional writings, particularly the Augsburg Confession. An engagement with this foundational confessional writing will be particularly important in view of its upcoming 500th anniversary in 2030. Our aim is to delve deeper into Lutheran theology, fostering a richer understanding and appreciation of our Lutheran heritage as we continue to shape our identity amid misleading and divisive theological currents.

##### *Liturgical studies*

- 48) Gathering for worship and prayer is central to expressing our faith. The Assembly in Kraków called on the LWF Communion Office to support LWF member churches in the development of accessible liturgical resources, such as music and prayers, as well as other resources. As a follow-up to the Assembly resolution and meeting the need to reflect more deeply on the theology of worship and to perceive developments in worship culture(s) in the different regions of the LWF to learn from one another, the LWF is going to start with a new program later in 2024. With the support of the German National Committee of the LWF, we can reintroduce a desk for liturgical studies for the first time in almost 20 years. The Global Liturgical Studies Coordinator will be placed at the Institute for Liturgical Studies in Leipzig, Germany.

##### *Theological Education and Formation*

- 49) Theological education and formation remain a key priority of the LWF. As a follow up after the publication of *For Building Up the Body of Christ: Lutheran World Federation Theological Education and Formation (TEF): A Historical Overview and a Look Ahead*, the global steering group continues with a renewed commitment for another 3 years. Regional conversations have begun in Latin America and Africa with other regions following. The LWF also has supported small-scale projects for specific initiatives of theological institutions and member churches in Cameroon, South Africa, Tanzania, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and initiatives benefitting member churches in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- 50) Nurturing a new generation of theologians is of paramount importance for the LWF and its member churches. In 2023, 60 new theological scholarships were awarded, marking a significant step in this direction. Regular accompaniment and online interactions have fostered a supportive environment for these emerging theologians. A group of current LWF scholarship holders shared their honest and

authentic narratives on how studying theology has transformed their thoughts, lives and faith in the publication *Journeys from the Crossroads*.

- 51) Under the Hélène Ralivao Fund, we continue affirming the crucial role of women in theology and leadership. We are grateful for the collaboration with Tumaini Makumira University, Tanzania, as the program is set for review, expecting lessons learned which would inform its next phase. Building on experiences from Africa, we are initiating a similar program in Asia.
- 52) The LWF has acquired significant experience with a variety of educational methodologies through in-person, online and hybrid models. A realistic, holistic, and contextualized approach is needed in the coming years to strengthen theological education and learning, regionally and globally.

#### *Women Doing Theology/Women in the Ordained Ministry*

- 53) In 2023, we celebrated the tenth anniversary of LWF Gender Justice policy, a significant milestone in our journey towards equality and just relations. The follow-up includes developing Bible studies and devotional resources that would strengthen women to engage in theological discourse and reflection in a variety of contexts. At regional level, the tenth anniversary of the LWF Gender Justice Policy included discussions at an event organized by the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa (LUCSA). Accompaniment of member churches on theology and gender justice was highlighted in various ways such as the 40th anniversary of women's ordination in the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil. After the release of the *Interim Report on the Study Process on the Experiences of Women in the Ordained Ministry*, member churches in Chile and Argentina have reflected on its findings and recommendations, and plan for future actions. This ongoing engagement underscores our commitment to foster a global dialogue and promote gender justice across the communion.

#### *Public Theology and Interreligious Relations*

- 54) In 2023, LWF offered training on church in the public space, interfaith relations and peacebuilding in collaboration with the National Committee of the LWF in Indonesia. At the end of May 2023, a consultation on Peace and Christian-Muslim Relations was organized in Senegal. In terms of interfaith relations, there was an encouraging moment with the publication of *Hope for the Future, a study document on renewing Jewish-Christian Relations*, both for member churches as well as our engagement with Jewish partners building up to and after the Assembly. However, in the wake of the ongoing war in Gaza and its global impact, this work has been disrupted while we seek to maintain relations and close contact with Jewish partners such as The International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC).
- 55) With its ecumenical partners, LWF has contributed to discussions on economic justice and freedom of religion or belief. The LWF has deepened its commitment to the economy of life through the New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA) initiative, especially through The Ecumenical School on Governance, Economics and Management (GEM) and ZacTax Campaign. There is also ongoing work on freedom of religion or belief together with the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). In December, LWF and WCRC organized a consultation "A Protestant Theological Approach to Freedom of Religion and Belief". Its findings have helped to shape the proposed public statement on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The work on this topic is ongoing with the WCRC.

## Leadership and Institutional development

### *Transformative Leadership for Member Churches*

- 56) *The Retreat of Newly Elected Leaders* (RoNEL) has developed into a robust annual program that combines reflections on theology, spirituality, and leadership that is relevant to church leaders. In 2023, leaders from 14 LWF member churches came together for mutual support and learning, sharing of experiences, reflecting their calling and serving in episcopal ministry, time for praying together and getting to know the work of LWF. RoNEL is carried out in close cooperation with Regional Secretaries.
- 57) The Seminars for Lay Leaders continue. The last one took place in June 2023 and the next one is planned for June this year. Like RoNEL, part of the seminar takes place in Geneva and the other part in Wittenberg. The focus is on theological and biblical values of church leadership, on learning more about the LWF's work, and sharing about the different contexts in which the lay leaders work.
- 58) Leadership training to LWF scholarship holders was also offered with a more systematic approach, where participants could interact with experts and experienced leaders from the Communion Office, theological institutions, and member churches. This initiative includes various modules such as peacebuilding, gender justice, youth empowerment, among others designed to equip these leaders with the skills and knowledge.
- 59) Further ongoing equipping for member churches in Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe includes addressing leadership during times of crisis, promoting gender justice with leadership structures of the church, and the importance of church leadership's role in peacebuilding. The latter has particularly been in focus in Ethiopia where LWF has provided several trainings for church leaders on peace building and conflict management.

### *Women in Leadership*

- 60) To better coordinate the regional activities in the field of gender justice, the LWF has formed regional gender justice networks. New coordinators were elected in 2023 in Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean for three-year terms. These networks play a crucial role in promoting gender justice in their respective regions. In 2023, the LWF celebrated the 10th anniversary of its gender justice policy, a testimony to our ongoing commitment to this cause. A webinar was organized for this purpose in December, with almost 100 participants from different regions.
- 61) Importantly, the LWF also recognizes the involvement of men in the efforts to achieve gender equality. Their participation helps to foster a more inclusive and equitable environment.

### *Youth in Leadership*

- 62) The LWF commitment to strengthen youth leadership is evidenced through our affirmation of the gifts of young people, ensuring their equitable presence in the structural and programmatic leadership of all aspects of church life, providing a platform for them to connect with one another, and to continue to build their specific capacities and skills for leadership. They have demonstrated their significant contribution and engagement at the Ecumenical Prayer Vigil in Vatican organized by the ecumenical Taizé Community at the end of September, and through their participation in the COP 28 in Dubai in early December, but also through their engagement with the United Nations ECOSOC Youth Forum in New York. A devotional called "Come let us celebrate together" prepared by youth in LAC was

launched at the Latin America & Caribbean and North America Leadership conference in April. It shows clearly how young people have keen interest in theologically relevant themes.

- 63) Equipping young people for peacebuilding is increasingly important in the current global climate. In May 2024, the global Peace Messengers training took place in Cambodia, bringing together youth from all the regions. This training program has proven to be an important tool in equipping youth with conflict resolution skills and capacities to lead respectful dialogue. Upon the training's completion, the participants of the Peace Messengers program are invited to implement small peace-building projects in their own contexts. In February 2024, youth participated in the previous Peace Messengers training, implemented small-scale peace projects showing how their contribution can address situations of conflict with creative initiatives.

### *LWF Learning*

- 64) The newly launched LWF Learning platform (<https://lutheranworld.org/learning>) is part of the LWF's commitment to offer accessible content and free online resources in key areas of LWF's thematic focus, including theology, diakonia, and leadership. These resources are available for member churches, theological institutions, and other interested parties. Since years, there has been a call to the LWF Communion Office to provide accessible theological materials and to eventually "co-brand" the already existing materials, produced by member churches, but of interest to the whole communion. Our work in this field continues.

### *Churches in Diaconal Action*

#### *Strengthening the Foundations for Diakonia*

- 65) The LWF supports scholarship holders for diakonia and development studies, with 71 new scholarships activated in 2023.
- 66) In October 2023, the LWF organized a diaconal workshop in Parapat, Indonesia, bringing together 120 participants from LWF member churches in seven Asian countries. The workshop aimed at strengthening the diaconal network and at reflecting about the purpose of diakonia.

#### *Member church projects and the Communion Solidarity Fund*

- 67) In 2023, there were 56 new or on-going member church projects with 23 that were activated on the same year. Recently, the member church project committee approved 24 long-term projects at its annual meeting in May. The long-term member church projects continue to be a tool for supporting the member churches in their mission. They strengthen the churches' relevance in their contexts, contribute to strengthening their capacities, and express communion solidarity. Several field visits were conducted for follow-up, review, and planning.
- 68) At the end of 2022, the LWF launched the Communion Solidarity Fund (CSF). There are many urgent needs requiring a rapid, short-term response due to unforeseen events or developments like conflicts, natural disasters, public health concerns or other emergencies affecting member churches and/or their wider communities. Urgent pastoral needs are also to be considered. The CSF aims to enable the communion to keep standing together as churches, thereby expressing solidarity as one major identity marker of the LWF. At the end of 2023 and the start of 2024, the fund provided grants for five rapid response projects in Honduras, Palestine, Madagascar, Tanzania and Kenya. The current flash

floods which have affected churches in Kenya and Brazil have also alerted us to the relevance of how churches contributing together allow for immediate quick response to immediate relief. I would like to express gratitude to all churches who have followed the call to contribute to this fund. We will soon be issuing another call to member churches to contribute to the fund.

#### *Prepared and Responsive Churches*

- 69) The Churches and Emergencies initiative has notably advanced disaster management and support for marginalized and vulnerable communities in Nepal, Venezuela, and Colombia. The first phase in Nepal ended successfully in 2023, with an external evaluation completed early 2024. In 2023, over 260 church staff were trained in emergency response and gender-based violence prevention. The program's success is attributed to the collaborative efforts of the three member churches and the two World Service Country programs in the design, monitoring, and evaluation, ensuring that churches are well-equipped to handle emergencies and contribute to healthier, more resilient communities.

#### *Churches and people on the move*

- 70) The Symbols of Hope program continued in 2023. The focus of the program is on raising awareness about irregular migration and human trafficking risks through various outreach programs. Additional concerns are that traffickers are increasingly targeting children and teenagers. The program is currently being implemented in collaboration with the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe.

#### *Support for regional-specific needs*

- 71) In 2024, the LWF introduced the Learning Program "Conviviality–Inspiration for a Diaconal Church in Europe" in Budapest and online as part of the European Conviviality process. The program confronting poverty in Africa that took a new shape in 2022, selected six member churches from Ethiopia, Kenya, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Namibia, and South Africa for new project support in 2024.

### *3.4 Promoting human dignity, justice, and peace*

- 72) The LWF is committed to upholding human dignity and working for justice and peace. In addition to our theological and diaconal work, this happens through our advocacy and our humanitarian and development work on the ground. While the LWF's advocacy work is supported and coordinated mainly by the Action for Justice (AfJ) unit in the Department for Theology, Mission, and Justice, the humanitarian and development work on the ground is primarily carried out by the Department for World Service (DWS).

#### *Advocacy Work*

- 73) Because of LWF's strength in bringing impulses from the global level to the local and from the local to the global, we can support our member churches and country programs in bringing global processes to the ground and vice versa, in bringing local concerns to the worldwide attention. This happens through raising the voice in the public, in participating various international processes and empowering LWF member churches to address the injustices. Throughout the year, LWF has been issuing several statements, last but not least on the war in Gaza and its impact on the civil population (for the compilation of LWF advocacy statements, see Council exhibit 16.1).

*Human rights and peacebuilding through interfaith cooperation*

- 74) LWF has engaged with the Human Rights Council (HRC) sessions, presenting statements and facilitating the participation of local advocates in sessions of the HRC. The LWF also facilitated engagement with regional human rights mechanisms, particularly the African Union, on the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (October 2023). A shadow report for the African Commission on Human and People's Rights in Uganda was compiled in September 2023.
- 75) The program supported the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) processes with selected country programs and member churches. UPR is a mechanism of the Human Rights Council that calls for each UN Member State to undergo a peer review of its human rights records every 4 to 5 years. Since the Assembly the LWF has worked on the UPR process together with member churches in Zimbabwe, Colombia, Nigeria, El Salvador, Namibia and Norway, and with country programs in Uganda, Ethiopia, Jordan, Iraq, Burundi, Kenya, Honduras and El Salvador (jointly with the member church). Further, LWF organized a summer school on the UPR in Germany in August 2023. Advocacy discussions on civic space and freedom of religion or belief were conducted in several countries, including India, Guatemala, and Indonesia.
- 76) As part of the 'Welcoming the Stranger' initiative and a follow-up to the international conference held in 2022, LWF, HIAS, and IRW, our Jewish and Muslim partners, organized an interfaith breakfast to celebrate the pledge, backed by the UNHCR, that was presented at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023. In April 2024, in the lead-up to World Refugee Day on 20 June, the LWF launched a podcast, in partnership with *A World of Neighbours* network, featuring people who have responded to the call to welcome the strangers in our midst.
- 77) The Action for Justice unit works closely with The Lutheran Office for World Community, the joint UN Representation of the ELCA and LWF, for UN-level advocacy, establishing vital contacts with various UN agencies. There has been intense work advocating for decisive action to address humanitarian crises spawned by conflicts in Ukraine, Ethiopia, and the Middle East.
- 78) Throughout the year, LWF attended UN Multi-Faith Advisory Council meetings, the UN High-Level Political Forum, and UN General Assembly meetings. LWF has advocated towards G20 on tax justice and attended various meetings with UN Security Council Permanent Representatives. LWF continues its advocacy in collaboration with ecumenical, interfaith, and civil society partners, including participation at the Global Refugee Forum 2023 and launching a joint faith-based pledge with Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) and HIAS.

*Gender Justice from an Advocacy Perspective*

- 79) A significant milestone was the launch of the Gender Justice Toolbox at the Thirteenth Assembly, which provided resources to further this cause. The LWF also contributed to the annual 16 Days Campaign. This international initiative takes place from the end of November until the first half of December and calls for the elimination of gender-based violence. The annual Women's Human Rights Advocacy Training offered a platform for empowering women and promoting their rights, further strengthening the commitment to gender justice.
- 80) Following up on the participation of an LWF delegation at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 68), the LWF continues to support in-country advocacy initiatives in several countries

and member churches to engage with the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

### *Climate Justice*

- 81) LWF actively participated in the 52nd and 53rd Human Rights Council sessions, United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), and climate negotiations in Bonn, advocating for human rights language in the Global Stocktake and the role of faith-based organizations in discussions about losses and damages. In preparation for those events and COP28, Action for Justice, they developed a position paper to guide LWF's advocacy, urging states to transition from incremental to transformative climate action.
- 82) LWF also supported the LAC Regional Climate Justice advocacy plan, organizing several activities, including a social media campaign on Earth Day on April 22, an online prayer for climate justice, and the Ecumenical Congress on Climate Justice with discussions on the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, climate negotiations, climate policies, and the role of the church in addressing climate change.
- 83) The LWF has continued to promote small-scale youth-led climate action projects in member churches. Twenty-two projects were approved for implementation in 2024.
- 84) LWF's advocacy work for climate-related matters is deeply grounded in our theological reflection. In recent years, LWF has contributed to the annual ecumenical celebration *of the Season of Creation*, which is dedicated to the care of creation.

### *Humanitarian and Development Work*

- 85) In 2023, the Department for World Service served **2.6 million people in 18 Country Programs and Emergency Operations in 25 countries**: in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Of the 2.6 million people, 47% were refugees, 9% were internally displaced, 2% were returnees, and 43% were local / host communities. 55% of the people we served were women and girls, and 45% were under 18. This work was supported by 6,914 staff, mostly local employees, volunteers, and incentive workers. Of these, nearly 40% were female employees. Conflict continued to drive the increase in the number of people served in 2023.
- 86) LWF World Service is a large actor in humanitarian and development work and is currently UNHCR's 10th-largest partner and second-largest faith-based partner. It continues to adapt and respond to complex humanitarian needs, upholding the rights and dignity of affected populations through strategic planning, robust program implementation, and strong partnerships. At the heart of this work is a commitment to quality, accountability, and a rights-based approach, which remains central to our mission. Overall, the operational environment has become more demanding and most of our operations are increasingly in areas with violent conflict, civil strife and war. This has been a development particularly in the past five years and has a major impact on the work we do.
- 87) An increasingly diminishing funding of humanitarian work remains a matter of concern. Underreporting on some conflicts contributes to a severe underfunding of much-needed humanitarian aid, especially in Central and East Africa. Despite the decreasing funding, LWF has been able to continue to support those in need. Here, a particular word of thanks must be given to all our related agencies and UN-related partners. Last year, LWF created the Olive Branch Foundation (OBF), an independent

foundation aiming to raise funds primarily for LWF's diaconal and humanitarian work. It aims to raise funds among the Swiss public. The board hired a director for OBF in 2024.

### *The contexts where we serve people*

- 88) Service to people in need is one of LWF's founding pillars. Supporting those suffering from violence and conflict, natural disasters, people on the move, and marginalized and vulnerable communities has remained one of the critical areas of LWF's work. In the following, I give examples of the contexts where we work through our country programs.

### *Violence and Conflict*

- 89) During the reporting period, there were ongoing and escalating conflicts in **Ukraine, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Haiti, and Sudan**, which led to mass displacements and increased humanitarian needs. LWF responded with various forms of emergency aid, including food, water, shelter, psychosocial support, and healthcare. Due to the eruption of violence in **Sudan**, displacing more than 8.6 million people, LWF scaled up its emergency responses in Chad, Ethiopia, and South Sudan.
- 90) The volatile and unstable security situation in the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** continues to cause the displacement of large populations who seek **asylum in Uganda**, one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world. LWF responded with relief goods, water and sanitation, and protection services. The country hosts over 1.6 million refugees and asylum seekers originating from more than eight countries, of which 500,000 refugees are from DRC.
- 91) The **war in Gaza** is currently in its seventh month, despite growing pressure for the cessation of violence. The security situation has also sharply deteriorated in the West Bank. LWF Jerusalem continues to respond to the needs of Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and is in the process of developing a more comprehensive Emergency Response Plan. Augusta Victoria Hospital has continued to serve Palestinian patients throughout the war. Unfortunately, the patients from Gaza have been denied access to the hospital since the beginning of the war. During my visit to Israel/Palestine in April, I also visited our Jerusalem program and thanked them for continuing their service during these difficult times.

### *Natural disasters*

- 92) Since the beginning of 2023, severe droughts, floods, and earthquakes have occurred in many regions. Due to the El Nino phenomenon and climate change, **countries in the Horn of Africa** experienced one of the worst droughts in decades, followed by massive flooding. LWF responded in **Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia** mainly with humanitarian aid, water trucking, and rehabilitating water sources through cash for work, providing people with much-needed income.
- 93) Following the devastating **earthquake in Syria** in February 2023, LWF mobilized to provide crucial multi-sectoral assistance in Aleppo, one of the hardest-hit regions. Working closely with local partners such as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch (GOPA-DERD), Caritas, Al Ta'alouf, and the St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee (EPDC) in Syria, LWF Jordan swiftly initiated a comprehensive response to address urgent needs. In 2024, LWF Jordan also registered an office in Syria, helping to increase our support in this heavily affected region.



- 94) In early November, an earthquake in **Nepal** killed 155 people and injured more than 400 in the Far Western province of the country. LWF Nepal responded with winterization kits, blankets, and non-food items.

#### *Supporting people on the move and offering support to vulnerable communities*

- 95) In October, I had a chance to visit the **LWF Central America Program** on its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The program covers various countries: Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. It was impressive to see the work the LWF does with young returnee migrants in Honduras, providing them with seed capital for starting their businesses and their respective training. As many of the young people who have either been sent back to Honduras or have returned voluntarily are traumatized, the LWF is also offering psychosocial support.
- 96) LWF continues to be present in many places where communities face hardship and are marginalized. These places are often less frequently reported upon, and marginalized people face hardship. **Venezuela** is experiencing a political and economic crisis, which in the last decade has caused more than 7 million people to flee the country. LWF supported vulnerable communities with food, protection services, and education. In neighboring Colombia, LWF also works with migrants from Venezuela.

#### *Programmatic Achievements and Developments*

- 97) Despite challenges, World Service achieved significant results across its three priority programmatic areas, upholding the right of every individual to a dignified life:

##### *Livelihoods*

- 98) LWF's efforts to support livelihoods concentrate on vocational training and skill-building initiatives, often paired with humanitarian aid and grants to kickstart small businesses. In agriculture, we prioritize integrating strategies for adapting to climate change.
- 99) There are many good examples of how people's livelihoods have improved thanks to LWF support. In Burundi, for instance, World Service works in the Cankuzo province in the northeastern part of the country, which is the poorest province in the country. The local farmers share land and resources with refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, returnees, and displaced persons. The region has experienced severe floods and droughts in the past years. At the beginning of the LWF WS project, only five percent of the people in the project area had enough to eat. Thanks to the LWF-initiated Community Integrated Development Project, almost 3000 families can now produce food. Three years later, at the end of 2023, their lives have visibly improved.
- Some of the key achievements in improving livelihoods across the country programs: 3,705 households gained access to land and land titles
  - 167,000 households reported sufficient food year-round
  - 109,247 individuals reported increased income, with 55% being women

##### *Quality Services*

- 100) Governments have the primary duty to provide public and community services such as education, water, and healthcare. In many places where LWF works, however, there is often a lack of capacity or inadequacy in the quality of services offered or available to refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees, and disadvantaged communities. In such situations, World Service temporarily supports

and complements the duty bearers to provide these services, eventually handing them over once the authorities have developed their capacities.

- 101) Among many good examples is how LWF has been working in Cameroon, a far northern province that is the country's most populous and poorest. In rural areas, 85% of the people live in extreme poverty, there is a lack of clean water, and food insecurity continues to be a big problem. World Service has been working in the region for years, focusing on improving the water supply, hygiene, and sanitation practices. In 2023, two new boreholes equipped with pumps were constructed, water point management committees were trained, four blocks of double-door latrines were mounted, and an awareness campaign for safe drinking water and good hygiene practices was launched. Overall, 34,317 people benefitted from LWF's WASH-related activities in the Far North region of Cameroon alone.
- 102) Overall, in 2023, hundreds of thousands of individuals were provided support in the field of quality services:
- 861,099 individuals accessed sufficient drinking water.
  - 117,417 children enrolled in educational programs.
  - 105,698 individuals received shelter assistance.

#### *Protection and Social Cohesion*

- 103) World Service's protection and social cohesion programming continued to enable individuals and communities to live safe, dignified, and empowered lives, free from all forms of discrimination, abuse, and exploitation. Mental health and psychosocial support continued to be among priority areas, recognizing that well-being goes well beyond physical needs. Addressing issues related to gender-based violence and women's rights, as well as holistic child protection, continued to be high on the agenda. We have also intensified our work with people with disabilities. In Nepal, for instance, where people with disabilities often face discrimination, this work is rooted in a rights-based approach. In 2023, LWF Nepal's advocacy supported almost 200 persons with disabilities in taking on active roles in their communities.
- 104) Here are some of the achievements in the field of protection and social cohesion in a nutshell:
- 94,098 individuals received protection assistance.
  - 161,887 individuals accessed psychosocial support services.
  - 105,284 children used child-friendly spaces.

#### *Upholding high standards and accountability*

- 105) The World Service country programs apply several policies and standards to ensure accountability and high work standards. World Service is committed to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) on Quality and Accountability. In 2023, several country programs completed self-assessments to measure their CHS application, identify improvement areas, and develop improvement plans.
- 106) Preventing sexual abuse and Harassment (PSEA) also remains a key concern throughout World Service's work. In 2023, 17 LWF country programs and emergency operations submitted their responses to the UN PSEA Capacity Assessment and were approved. The processes will be fully concluded by the end of 2024.

- 107) LWF takes safety and security issues seriously. A safety and security survey was conducted to analyze the current situation better and to feed into the work planning in the coming years. The majority of those consulted in the country programs predict a worsening of the security environment in their locations, indicating access difficulties and increasing violence. Several country programs received Crisis Management training during the reporting period, and security advisers provided security briefings for traveling staff, inductions to all new staff, and conducted on-site training and assessments. On the whole, safety and security is identified as the biggest risk to World Service globally and this is why significant investment in this area is needed going forward.
- 108) World Service is also working on completing new Country Program Strategies, enhancing policy compliance, and improving program quality. Key priorities include addressing safety, security, humanitarian access, and funding challenges.
- 109) In addition to the LWF overall strategy for 2025-2031, the World Service strategy for the same strategic period has been developed and is submitted for approval to the Committee for World Service. Like the proposed LWF strategy, it concentrates on sharing hope and aims to guide World Service's work on the ground worldwide.
- 110) It remains essential to foster close cooperation between the LWF country programs and member churches of the LWF, particularly where they coexist in the same country. In my visits to the LWF Central America program in 2023 and to the Ukraine program in May, I witnessed the excellent collaboration that is taking place on the ground. Similar examples of good partnerships can be brought from other parts of the world. It is essential to maintain good relations even if operational collaboration is not possible.

#### 4. Organizational Sustainability and Effectiveness

- 111) To remain a sustainable and effective organization, the LWF continues to invest in organizational development in various areas. Sustainability encompasses many dimensions, from financial sustainability and strategic planning to ways of working, staff wellbeing and systems development. Since the beginning of 2024, the Communion Office Leadership Team has worked intensely on identifying potential new funding opportunities, while looking into cost reduction. At the same time, effort has been put into paying attention to increasing efficiency in the ways we work, and to staff wellbeing with a survey being carried out in the beginning of the year. The first three months in 2024 were a very intense time also thanks to developing the LWF strategy for 2025-2031 and carrying out the office move in March. In the following, I would like to highlight a few specific areas from the areas of work that were mentioned above, with most of them being under the responsibility of the Department for Planning and Operations.

##### *Office Move*

- 112) In March, the LWF moved offices. The Ecumenical Center building at Route de Ferney 150 in Geneva is owned by the World Council of Churches and the WCC has asked all tenants and ecumenical sister organizations to move out no later than June this year, the reason being construction works. The main building of the Ecumenical Center will be renovated, other buildings will be torn down, and a new office building will be built. This is a part of the so-called Green Village project. The LWF is committed to moving into the new Ecumenical Centre. Until then the ecumenical organizations will be in separate buildings in Geneva. However, this does not change our ecumenical commitment

which was well expressed by the founding theologians of LWF: “We must view our confessional and ecumenical responsibility not in competition with one another, but the one through the other”. Therefore, we regard the fact that we will not be placed in the same building with WCC and ACT Alliance offices for the few years to come, rather as a call to be more intentional about cooperation and meetings. To properly inaugurate the temporary LWF offices in the Octagon building at Chemin du Pavillon 2 in Geneva, we have planned a visit to the offices during the Council meeting.

- 113) The relocation from the Ecumenical Centre was one of the foci for the Department for Planning and Coordination since the end of 2023. The move was very well coordinated and took place smoothly, with an effective inter-departmental team ensuring regular coordination. With the purpose of efficient and sustainable use of the new office space we invested time and efforts to examine the work methods in the Communion Office, and in a collaborative workspace workshop staff contributed to design of the new workspace that resulted in a reduced office area but more suitability for teamwork. The new office space is very welcoming and enhances clearly cooperation between departments. We are glad we have already received several guests in our new premises.

### *LWF Archives*

- 114) There is a famous saying “Who doesn’t remember past lives without future.” LWF Archives is an important place for LWF’s institutional memory. The office move also has an impact on the archives: there was intense archiving of documents that had been kept in offices, and the physical archives have been moved to the Octagon building. Given the space that is available, we need to be more strategic in identifying what documents should be easily accessible as hard copies and how we can systematize better our digital archives. With the long-serving LWF archivist Beatrice Bengtsson retiring this summer, we’ll need to make sure that we safeguard the accessibility of all relevant documents. More emphasis will be put on digitalizing the documents and systematizing the already digitalized documents. Here we are aiming to get some outsourced support, last but not least in order to work on an effective search engine for archive documents.

### *Staff Wellbeing Survey and Follow-Up*

- 115) In December and January, a comprehensive staff wellbeing survey was carried out among Communion Office Staff to assess and address staff needs. The survey results have been discussed extensively in management, staff, and the Staff Representative Council. The overall results were good: staff are highly committed, find their work meaningful, and are generally satisfied with their managers. The survey identifies three main areas of improvement: simplifying the processes and increasing efficiency of systems; workload and the need to adjust better to the fact that some Communion Office colleagues are working remotely; improved communication between the departments and a need to create more learning and socializing spaces for staff.
- 116) An action plan for the coming months has been put together to follow up on the areas that need improvement. Implementing the action plan goes hand in hand with improving the systems and increasing the efficiency of work.

### *Data protection*

- 117) Following-up a new law regarding data protection in Switzerland internal work processes started with focus on data protection. With a wide team of colleagues, we have mapped the internal processes that include the handling of sensitive data, established a registry of these processes and worked on

the Data Protection Guidelines. This period also included the clarification of the travel process and taking part in updating the safety and security policy.

- 118) During the month of December, a security incident happened at WCC, our IT service provider. During a limited time certain functions, applications were not available but WCC (together with external forensics team) made all efforts and restored the systems. Though no LWF data has been direct subject to this breach, we have sent the obligatory report to the relevant Swiss authorities. The incident and the response have been evaluated and steps were taken to strengthen protocols and systems' security.

### *Financial sustainability*

- 119) The Finance Office successfully rolled out an upgraded version of the Sage Accounting software, which was tested and went live in October 2023. This allows the Finance Office to have a more up-to-date view of the financial data as all accounting is now done via central server access. The financial closure of the Assembly also took place during this period. After receiving all invoices, we managed to close the Assembly books balanced, without the previously budgeted deficit. More detailed information about the overall finances of the LWF can be found in Exhibit 11.
- 120) After reassessing the projected income and costs, a working budget has been finalized for the year 2024 that reflects the shrinking resources. A strategic review of the budgeting and alternative proposals for action have been developed with the aim of reducing costs for support services. The 2025 budget has been prepared taking these elements into consideration. The investment committee continuously monitored the status of the invested financial resources and took steps to search for a new fund manager that could improve the use of the resources and return on investments. The Finance Office also helped the administration of the Endowment Fund in renewing its strategic approach to optimize the Fund's performance amidst financial market fluctuations.
- 121) The management has also been looking into fundraising strategy, identifying an action plan for implementing various actions such as donation campaigns; inviting member churches which have so far not been contributing very strongly to the work of the communion but have an interest in particular areas of LWF's work, to support events related to the respective programmatic areas; finding new potential partners, intensifying the work of the Olive Branch Foundation.

### *Planning and cooperation*

- 122) In early 2024, the PMER unit facilitated the work planning process for 2024. More attention was paid to interdepartmental collaboration in planning to enhance in-house cooperation, to avoid working in silos and to benefit across the programs from the different expertise we have available in the Communion Office. An in-house LWF Event Calendar that is centrally accessible helps to have a good overview of all major events and processes that are being planned by LWF.
- 123) Co-operation has continued with the related agencies throughout the reporting period. Meetings with the Steering Group and an online Working Together meeting took place to inform our close partners about the recent developments in the LWF, particularly regarding the strategy development, and to get updates from related agencies. We are very grateful to all our committed partners who make the important work the LWF does on behalf of its member churches possible. In the coming strategic period, we want to make our partners more visible to give them the acknowledgement they deserve. This brings me to the next important area of our work, which is communications.

## *Communications*

- 124) Communication is integral to LWF's work and is essential for reaching global and local audiences. The LWF cannot fulfill its task to be the "super-connector" without good communication work. In 2023, the LWF's communications work focused on the Thirteenth Assembly. Publications, promotion, media relations, and overall visibility were the priority of the Office for Communication throughout the year. The Assembly's visual identity got deserved recognition earlier this year when its designer won top awards at the 95th Religion Communicators Council Convention.
- 125) In 2023, we launched LWF Learning, a valuable addition that consolidates resources and learning materials related to our programmatic work, demonstrating our commitment to providing accessible and comprehensive resources to our stakeholders.
- 126) A highlight of the communications in 2024 was a revised advent campaign. Building on the Assembly theme, it focused on hope. Short videos featuring messengers of hope from member churches and country programs resonated deeply on social media.
- 127) The Communications unit has also been doing capacity building with member churches. Earlier this year, the Office for Communication organized a training workshop on effective communication and the church's mission for leaders and communication staff in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. The workshop was very well received. Such workshops, whether online or in-person, are a good opportunity to share resources and to enhance mutual exchange and learning.
- 128) LWF has a large following of nearly 100,000 people across its social media platforms. This online community is highly active, with an engagement rate well above the average in social media.
- 129) The Office for Communications is working on a renewed communications framework centered on hope and aligned with our new strategy. This framework guides our efforts in the coming year, ensuring our communications continue to resonate and inspire a diverse global audience. We strongly encourage people in our member churches to sign up for the LWF's weekly newsletter, that shares inspiring news from the global communion and the member churches every Friday.

## **5. Conclusion and looking ahead**

- 130) Since the Assembly in Kraków, the LWF has been intensely working on identifying how the impulses received at the Assembly can be translated into the work of the LWF in the coming strategic period. Developing the strategy and sharpening the foci of our work happened simultaneously with the office move and its preparations. It has been an intense period since the Assembly, yet we are well equipped to go into the next strategic period with clear vision that is shortly captured in the mission statement of the LWF, "to share hope that empowers churches and people to make a positive difference in the world".
- 131) I look very much forward to working together with you on implementing the new strategy. Together we can draw from each other's experiences and strengths, to support each other through prayer and action. Bonds that bind LWF member churches together are not just based on formalities and agreements, they reach far deeper, bringing us through God's gracious Spirit to ever deeper unity. I am confident that through the various study groups and Task Forces that you will appoint during this meeting, we will be able to express even more clearly how we understand the theological basis on

which we stand; how we understand peace and reconciliation; how we understand mutual responsibility and mutual care in a communion of churches; how we care for the whole creation around us; how we invite all generations to participate in the life of the church, spreading hope and sharing the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ; how we share hope in deeds to those in need, regardless of their background.

- 132) Anticipating the next Council meeting in 2025, I would already now like to highlight that the appointment of a study group on Augsburg Confession and its meaning for our churches today, as well as its ecumenical significance, will take place next year. That will be a very symbolic move, given the fact that in 2025 we'll reflect together with most of Christianity on the Nicene Creed, initially formulated in 325.
- 133) I would like to conclude with a word of gratitude. First, I would once again like to express my gratitude to all LWF partners for their support. I am looking forward to continuing our good conversations about shared priorities to see how to be messengers of hope and God's love for the whole human family and creation. Support can be manifold, from financial to exchange of ideas and know-how. There is always something that we can learn from our partners while also contributing to their mission.
- 134) Last, but not least, I would like to thank the whole staff of the LWF for their committed work. It is a joy and pleasure to work with professionals who are proactive and committed to making the world a better place.
- 135) We'll continue our journey, guided by the LWF vision of a Communion that trusts in the liberating grace of God and is united through Jesus Christ, working for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Dr Anne Burghardt, General Secretary

## 6. Appendix: List of travels

- Ecumenical Vesper in Rome on 30 September
- Visit to the WS Central America Program, member churches in El Salvador and Honduras, 23-29 October
- Visit to the member churches in Indonesia, 20-29 November
- Meeting of the Board of the German National Committee and the installation of the new leadership of GNC in Hanover (Germany), 10-11 December
- Visit to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, the LWF Jerusalem program and to LWF Jordan, Israel/Palestine, 11-16 April
- Meeting of the signatories of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), Bern (Switzerland), 26-28 April
- Visit to the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine and the LWF Country Program in Ukraine, 10-16 May