



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

A Communion  
of Churches

[lutheranworld.org](http://lutheranworld.org)

# A Chronological Compilation of Key Official LWF Discussions and Decisions on Family, Marriage and Sexuality

## 1995 – 2013\*

*\*[This 2012 Council Exhibit has been updated to include recent processes.]*

### Preamble

- (1) The subject of *family, marriage and sexuality* has been on the LWF table of the discussions since 1995. The document shares a bird's eye view of official discussions and decisions of the LWF governing bodies at the global level. It is exclusively based on LWF official documents, highlighting main stages in the process.
- (2) The document adopts a *narrative approach*, and should therefore be read from that perspective. That the LWF has engaged on this matter since 1995 with the various stages contained here are indicative of the complexity of the matter at hand.

### The LWF Council, Windhoek, Namibia 20 - 27 June 1995

- (3) The LWF Council meeting in Windhoek, Namibia, marks an important stage in the current LWF discussion on the issue of *family, marriage and sexuality*.
- (4) Then General Secretary Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, in his report to the Council called attention to "*growing concern within the member churches and indeed throughout the ecumenical community [on] the church's pastoral and social response to the questions relating to human sexuality.*" He noted different responses among member churches "*in light of their cultural and legal contexts as well as their theological understandings;*" and the difficulty in approaching the issue as in some languages, where the term "sexuality" does not even exist and efforts to translate the word

*“involves using phrases with different nuances that may conjure negative associations.”<sup>1</sup>*

- (5) The report proposed that the LWF Council considers starting “a process of consultation” between the member churches worldwide “to facilitate a dialogue on these” issues, with the hope that the LWF would better understand the different views on the subject in the member churches and “to identify areas of convergence in our differing responses.”
- (6) The Council referred the matter to the Program Committee for Mission and Development for discussion and guidance. The Committee proposed opening up a consultative processes within the worldwide body to facilitate dialogue on pastoral and social response to questions about human sexuality that was welcomed by the Council.<sup>2</sup>

## The Lutheran World Federation Tenth Assembly, 21- 31 July 2003, Winnipeg, Canada

- (7) The subject of *family, marriage and sexuality* came up strongly and generated intense discussions among delegates and participants to the LWF Tenth Assembly in Winnipeg, Canada in 2003. In his report to the Tenth Assembly, the General Secretary Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko pointed again at the controversy generated in some societies and churches by the “issue of homosexuality and attitude to homosexual persons,” noting its complexity:

*“Another issue that has generated a lot of controversy in some societies and in some churches is the issue of homosexuality and attitudes to homosexual persons. This is an issue that has been with humankind since time immemorial, and will continue to be with us in the future. It will not go away. It is a complex matter with ethical dimensions related to culture, anthropology and spirituality.*

*There are some churches in which this issue has not been raised for discussion, some others in which it has become a discussion of great controversy, and still some others in which it has been addressed with little or no difficulty. Since we are a communion of interdependent churches, no member church can ignore the issue, or consider it closed one way or the other, while sister churches are struggling with it.*

*An issue of this kind requires patient discussion and prayerful reflection. This Assembly should take steps to ensure careful preparation for such discussion and reflection. I propose therefore a process of consultation, exchange, discussion and prayer as a communion, in order to seek the guiding wisdom of the Holy Spirit. The new Council could be asked to examine this issue in a proper consultative way utilizing the space that we have for differences of views and open deliberation within our communion.”<sup>3</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Minutes, LWF Council Windhoek, Namibia, 1995 P.7 See council 1995 minutes

<sup>2</sup> Minutes, LWF Council Windhoek, Namibia, 1995 p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> “For the Healing of the World: Official Report, LWF Tenth Assembly, Winnipeg, Canada, 21-31 July 2003”, p. 34 and Minutes, Meeting of the LWF Council, Winnipeg, Canada, 31 July – 2 August 2003, Exhibit 10.4, p 11.

- (8) The Tenth Assembly Message reflects the complexity of debate in plenary as follows:
- a) *“We acknowledge the diversity within the communion on matters of human sexuality. At the same time, we believe it is important to enter into dialogue to clarify our understandings and learn from the Scriptures, contemporary knowledge and our different experiences. In approaching such dialogue we seek to preserve the human rights and dignity of all people”<sup>4</sup>*
  - b) *“Therefore, we commit ourselves and call on member churches to encourage and support one another in a) study and respectful dialogue on issues of marriage, family and human sexuality, in a manner appropriate to the needs of each member church, and b) advocacy for the human rights and the dignity of all persons regardless of gender or sexual orientation”<sup>5</sup>*
- (9) Following extensive debates, the Assembly voted to “refer the resolution concerning homosexuality to the Council”<sup>6</sup>. More concretely,
- (10) “The Assembly,
- a) *Supports the proposal expressed by the General Secretary, Dr. Ishmael Noko, in his report to the Assembly to initiate a process of consultation, exchange, discussion and prayer on the issue of homosexuality... [quoting at length the General Secretary’s proposal outlined above],*
  - b) *Asks the General Secretary to present a proposal for this process at the forthcoming Council.*<sup>7</sup>

## LWF Council Meeting, Winnipeg, Canada, 31 July - 2 Aug 2003

- (11) The new LWF Council elected by the LWF Eleventh Assembly in 2003 held its first meeting right after the Assembly. Included in the agenda was a review of the mandate, message and decisions of the Tenth Assembly. The Council’s discussion on sexuality is reflected under the theme “Justice and Healing in Families”:
- “because of the great sensitivity of the issue in the churches, the following comments were made and concerns raised:*
- a) *Time had come for the LWF to address the issue of human sexuality and homosexuality; yet*
  - b) *As the process was initiated, it was crucial to be open and transparent, be patient and take ample time to reach as close a consensus as possible within the global Lutheran family.*
  - c) *While studies were undertaken in Geneva, a consultation process could be started in the churches so that LWF could build on what churches have done and see how their findings and results can be fed into the process.*

---

<sup>4</sup> LWF Tenth Assembly Official Report, p. 56 and Minutes, LWF Council Winnipeg, Canada, 31 July – 2 August 2003, Exhibit 10.3, para 35.

<sup>5</sup> LWF Tenth Assembly Official Report, p. 59 and Minutes, LWF Council Winnipeg, Canada, 31 July – 2 August 2003, Exhibit 10.3, para 35.

<sup>6</sup> LWF Tenth Assembly Report, 2003, page 80

<sup>7</sup> Minutes, Meeting of the Council, Winnipeg, Canada, 31 July – 2 August 2003, Exhibit 10.4, p 11

- d) *it had to be understood that issues like homosexuality did not have same prominence in the churches of the South, which have to face quite different problems of their own. It is, therefore, important in addressing these matters to avoid creating additional problems.*

*In summing up the discussion on this issue, the Council VOTED*

- e) *to refer paragraphs 51 - VII: Justice and Healing in Families – of the Assembly Message to the General Secretary with the request in ongoing consultation with the Council, to propose a process based on set premises and principles, with the understanding that a document be submitted to the Council in its 2004 meeting.*<sup>8</sup>

## **The LWF Council meeting Geneva, Switzerland, 1-7 September 2004**

- (12) At its meeting in Geneva in 2004, and in line with the request from the post Assembly Council meeting in 2003, the LWF Council voted:
- a) *to approve the appointment and composition of the Task Force on Family, Marriage and Sexuality.*
- b) *to approve the Terms of Reference of the Task Force on Family, Marriage and Sexuality.*<sup>9</sup>
- (13) The main functions of the Task Force (TF) as outlined in the Terms of Reference were:
- a) *To assist the Council by proposing guidelines and processes by which respectful discussion might be pursued among member churches on issues of family, marriage and human sexuality where there are agreements and disagreements by:*
- b) *Reflecting biblically, theologically, historically and ethically on the practices and attitude identified, and*
- c) *Giving specific attention to whether; and how, different hermeneutical approaches to Scripture, and different ethical attitudes, practices and policies, which affect the unity of the Church, can be dealt with.*
- d) *The Task Force shall conduct its work with due regard to the discussions on similar issues within the World Council of Churches, especially Faith and Order, and shall familiarize itself with existing complementary work taking place within the LWF secretariat and the member churches.*
- e) *The Task Force shall conclude its report by the end of the year 2006.*<sup>10</sup>
- (14) The TF would work independently from the Geneva secretariat and report to the Council through its chairperson who is also a Council member, to create a way that

---

<sup>8</sup> Minutes, Meeting of the LWF Council Winnipeg, Canada, 31 July – 2 August 2003, page 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> "Resolutions of the LWF Council," 2004, p.1, 2.

<sup>10</sup> See 2004 Council report, also Exhibit 10 Supplement, pp 1-2.

member churches might consult with each other to understand and decide on these matters.<sup>11</sup>

- (15) The 2004 Council also adopted a proposed slate of eight persons to the task force (three men, three women, and two youth, male and female) based on nominations from the different regions of the LWF. The TF received vast documentation from member churches, other Christian churches and agencies with varying positions and hermeneutical and theological considerations.

## The LWF Council Meeting Jerusalem/Bethlehem, 31 Aug - 6 Sep 2005

- (16) At this meeting, the Task Force presented the “Interim Report of the Task Force” (check Exhibit 10). Following extensive discussion and suggestions to guide the TF in its work, the Council voted,

a) *to receive with appreciation the Interim Report of the Task Force on Family, Marriage and Sexuality.*<sup>12</sup>

## The LWF Council Meeting Lund, Sweden, 20-27 March 2007

- (17) The TF submitted its final report at the LWF Council meeting in Lund.<sup>13</sup> The report contained three suggestions:<sup>14</sup>

a) *A study process of five years, with consultations in different regions;*

b) *A list of guidelines for dialogue to be observed during these consultations and discussions to come, related to specific issues that needed to be discussed; and*

c) *Presentation of a list of more general guidelines aimed at dealing with difficult discussions and strongly opposed opinions.*

- (18) After lengthy and thorough discussion in plenary, the Council;

a) *voted “to receive the final report of the Task Force on Family, marriage and sexuality, and*

b) *to adopt the Guidelines for Processes and Dialogue and commend them to the member churches.” These guidelines provided a biblical, theological and methodological structure that would guide discussions among member churches*<sup>15</sup>

- (19) The Council also adopted the TF proposal of a five-year period for respectful discussions within and among the LWF member churches.

---

<sup>11</sup> “LWF Task Force for Discussion on Family, Marriage and Sexuality – Terms of Reference”, (adopted by the Council 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Minutes, Meeting of the LWF Council, Jerusalem-Bethlehem, 31 August to 6 September 2005, page 19.

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF\\_Documents/EN/Council\\_07-Task\\_Force\\_Report-EN.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/EN/Council_07-Task_Force_Report-EN.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Minutes, Meeting of the LWF Council, Lund, Sweden, 20-27 March 2007, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Minutes, Meeting of the LWF Council, Lund, Sweden, 20-27 March, 2007, and p. 21

- (20) Participants and representatives from all the different regions at the Council meeting held regional meetings, discussed and submitted their reports received by the Council.

## The LWF Council Meeting Chavannes-de-Bogis, Switzerland, 22-27 Oct 2009

- (21) At the LWF Council meeting in Chavannes-de-Bogis, Switzerland, 2009, the subject of *family, marriage and sexuality* came up again and was discussed. More apparent were different levels of discussions including some member churches taking own decisions.
- (22) The Council voted;
- a) *to request the LWF Secretariat to develop plan of action for the years remaining until 2012 that takes into consideration the following aspects;*
  - b) *That the General Secretary remind member churches about the Report of the Task Force on "Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality" adopted by the LWF Council at its meeting in Lund in 2007 and accompany them as they follow up through study and discussion of this document;*
  - c) *That LWF (DMD-DTS) provide study material on how Lutherans understand and interpret Scripture in the light of current challenges of the communion; and*
  - d) *That the pre-assembly meetings provide time and space for consultation on this issue and that DMD develop and provide a framework for discussion.*<sup>16</sup>

## LWF Regional Pre-Assembly Consultations 2009/2010

- (23) In accordance with the resolutions of the LWF Council in 2009, the LWF Secretariat explored and identified processes of utilizing the LWF regional Pre-Assembly consultations in preparation for the Eleventh Assembly. Member churches were reminded of the Lund 2007 guidelines and study process, and provided space in the regional Pre-Assemblies for member churches to consult among themselves at that level.
- (24) Consultations indicated the wish not to discuss the issue of family, marriage and sexuality at the Assembly. The concern was that the topic of sexuality might overshadow all other issues at the Assembly.

## LWF Eleventh Assembly Stuttgart, Germany, 20 - 27 July 2010

- (25) Reporting to the Assembly the General Secretary shared the concerns expressed by the Regional Pre-Assemblies Consultations and advised that the issue of sexuality not be taken up at the Assembly:<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Minutes, Meeting of the LWF Council, Geneva, Switzerland, 22-27 October 2009, p.31

<sup>17</sup> "LWF Eleventh Assembly, Stuttgart, Germany, 20 to 27 July 2010" Official Report, P.28.



- e) *From the reports received so far it is clear that the member churches are at various stages of reflection and action and those different positions are emerging on these issues.*
  - f) *During the Pre-Assembly gatherings, I have had consultative discussions with church leaders and delegates as to how we might proceed toward 2012, taking into account that the Assembly was imminent. The general consensus was that these issues not be dealt with by the Assembly but that the process be allowed to continue until 2012 as originally recommended by the task force.*
- (26) Honoring regional Pre-Assembly Consultations' advice, the LWF Eleventh Assembly did not deal with the issue of *family, marriage and sexuality* but understood that the process continues under the guidance of the new Council elected at the Eleventh Assembly.

## The LWF Executive Committee Meeting Geneva, Switzerland, 24-26 Nov 2010

- (27) The newly elected LWF General Secretary Rev. Martin Junge recalled the Council decision in Lund, Sweden in 2007, Council discussions in 2009 and subsequent indications from regional Pre-Assembly gatherings based on which the Eleventh Assembly did not take up issues pertaining to sexuality.
- (28) The report gave a brief picture of how the discussions unfolded since 2007 with wide variety in the responses of member churches:
- a) *Many member churches have no response: either they have not (yet) studied it in a formal way or they have chosen a "dignified silence" on the issues it discusses, holding that these are not necessary or helpful questions in their contexts.*
  - b) *Two regions have set up own study commissions that are working on the issue (Africa and Asia).*
  - c) *Other member churches are responding basically affirmatively to the process and the resulting perspectives, acknowledging the complexity of the issues under discussion but underlining the theological understanding that these issues should not be understood as dividing issues.*
  - d) *At least two member churches took decisions in 2009. Toward these decisions, there are different responses.*

*Some member churches express pain because they understood the Lund 2007 decisions to imply a moratorium on such actions not only for LWF actions at the communion level but also within the member churches. Some believe that the churches did not consult, or did not consult adequately, about their reflections and imminent decisions.*

*At least two important clusters of theological issues seem to arise from the ongoing conversation in the LWF communion.*
  - e) *Some surround the reading of the Bible. These issues can be phrased as questions about the authority of the Bible and about its interpretation (hermeneutics).*

- f) *Another set of issues arising concerns the mutual accountability resulting from the self-understanding of LWF member churches as a communion of churches. While acknowledging the juridical autonomy of LWF member churches as entities with their own constitutions and governing bodies, the current discussions raise the question about the practical implications resulting from the theological and spiritual self-understanding of LWF as a communion of churches.*
- (29) The report identified some guiding principles for the way towards 2012:
- a) *The LWF secretariat (communion office) to play a proactive role: Because of the implications of these discussions for the ongoing and future journey of the LWF communion and in line with the decisions of the LWF Council 2009, the LWF-Secretariat) needs to play an active role in the process leading to 2012...:*
  - b) *Facilitate theological conversation: the discussions on the authority of the Bible hermeneutic principles (theology and context) and the understanding of the church (ecclesiology) need to be enhanced and nurtured.*
  - c) *Organize and facilitate communication: tables for dialogue at a regional and global level need to be provided, where communication across contexts can take place*
  - d) *Clarify the process: shared understanding of the dialogue process within the LWF communion, its benchmarks (incl. 2012) and its perspectives beyond that date need to be ensured.*
  - e) *The year 2012 – a benchmark in the process... should not be regarded as a time to come to final conclusions as a LWF communion, but as an opportunity to map out the different contexts and the specific understanding that is formulated within LWF member churches, and to discern about the ongoing and future journey as a communion of churches.*

On the question of an adequate biblical model to understand and frame the conversation the General Secretary suggested
  - f) *“...that our process toward 2012 is undertaken in the spirit of ... “Emmaus conversation”..., thus making clear that ours is a deeply spiritual discernment of our faith journey as a communion of churches....*
- (30) The General Secretary then invited discussion and guidance of the Executive Committee to assist the Communion office in shaping the strategy and the process that needs to be developed towards the year 2012.
- (31) Following deliberations, the Executive Committee
- “approved the steps proposed by the General Secretary to undertake a proactive role, and to establish a special task force that would monitor the dialogue in order to shape and coordinate planning throughout the Communion”<sup>18</sup>*

---

<sup>18</sup> Minutes Ex-Com 2010



## LWF Council Meeting Geneva, Switzerland, 9-14 June 2011

- (32) In his report, the LWF General Secretary Rev. Junge recalled the actions of the previous Council concerning the difficult issue of Family, Marriage and Sexuality, summarizing activities and developments at different levels within the LWF communion. He recalled the decision of the Council in 2007 regarding guidelines in the report of the TF inviting respectful discussion within, and among, LWF member churches.
- (33) Rev. Junge pointed at different stages where member churches were with variety of opinion. Based on his visits and listening to member churches at regional and individual levels and in consultation with the Executive Committee at its November 2010 meeting, the General Secretary proposed to the Council three guiding principles:
- a) *The year 2012 was an opportunity to continue discussions and dialogue within and across the regions.*
  - b) *The year 2012 was a benchmark in the process, but not a deadline to come to a conclusion as an LWF communion. It was an opportunity to map out the different contexts and understandings.*
  - c) *The role of the LWF Secretariat (LWF Communion Office) was a facilitator of discussions leading to conversation in 2012.<sup>19</sup>*
- (34) The Council then voted:
- to receive the Report of the General Secretary with appreciation<sup>20</sup>*

## The LWF Strategy 2012 – 2017 “With passion for the church and for the world”

- (35) In view of the ongoing conversation, the LWF Strategy 2012-2017 approved by the Council in Geneva in June 2011 states:
- “As a communion we will find ways better to discuss the issues that potentially divide us- issues such as human sexuality and different interpretation of the Scriptures - in ways that honor both diversity of views on important issues and the more fundamental basis of unity among us. We will first of all rely on the power of Eucharistic worship and prayer.”<sup>21</sup>*
- “Through being in communion, member churches share a spiritual journey. God’s Spirit enables us to listen to one another; to share our joy and sufferings; to grow in practices of mutual care, admonition, forgiveness and reconciliation;*

---

<sup>19</sup> See GS Report and also minutes, The LWF Council meeting 9-14 June, 2011, p.20

<sup>20</sup> Minutes of the Council meeting 9-14 June 2011, para. 105, p. 22

<sup>21</sup> LWF Strategy 2012-2017: The LWF Communion – With Passion for the Church and for the World, The Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, Switzerland 2011, p.21

*and to deepen our understanding of the need for one another as members of the Body of Christ”<sup>22</sup>*

## **LWF Meeting of Officers, Budapest, Hungary 16-18 November 2011**

- (36) In his report to the Meeting of Officers in Budapest, Hungary, the LWF General Secretary Rev. Martin Junge presented under the theme “Claiming the Gift of Communion on the Journey Towards Clearer understanding Among us” (Exhibit 3.1), recalled the 2007 Council decisions on Marriage, Family and Sexual and a timeframe of five years (until 2012) for deliberations in member churches. He also recalled later meetings of the Council that decided 2012 “should be a milestone not an endpoint, a benchmark rather than a closure, in a conversation that needed to be framed very carefully.” He sought the advice of the Meeting of Officers on:
- a) *the overall framing of the process, to include i) strengthening of the communion as an overall framework, ii) focusing on communion relationships in the context of divergent positions, and iii) internal and external communication;*
  - b) *the guiding and strategic role of the Communion Office to safeguard the principles as outlined, while preparing for the 2012 Council meeting.*
- (37) Following a moment of sharing by the Officers from their perspectives and their regions, it was “agreed that discussions must continue, and that more time was needed. The subject would not be concluded at the 2012 Council meeting.”<sup>23</sup>

## **LWF Council Meeting Bogota, Colombia, 15-20 June 2012 and the path ahead**

- (38) On behalf of the LWF communion, the June 2012 LWF Council meeting in Bogota, Colombia, took on the conversation and reflected on the way ahead. In preparation for the Council meeting, the LWF General Secretary Rev. Martin Junge had sent out a letter (dated 11 May 2012) to the Council Members “in order to provide some additional information about the “Emmaus Conversation” which was part of the Council schedule. In his letter, the General Secretary reiterated the 2007 Lund Council decision, as well as the LWF strategic priority Area 1, Goal 3, which refers to the growth of the communion and the context in which discussion should take place. The letter also stipulated how the conversation was going to take place during the Council meeting, giving priority to (a) providing space for careful listening; and (b) discerning together about ways ahead in the journey of the LWF communion of churches. It was in Bogota that the LWF conversation on Family Marriage and Sexuality was first officially referred to as the “Emmaus Conversation” based on Luke 24:17, with emphasis on the ongoing dialogical process.

---

<sup>22</sup> LWF Strategy 2012-2017: The LWF Communion – With Passion for the Church and for the World, The Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, Switzerland 2011, p.9

<sup>23</sup> Minutes, Meeting of Officers, Budapest, 2011, p. 9.

(39) After the Council meeting, the LWF President and General Secretary provided five key insights from the conversation through a communiqué (dated 20 June 2012) affirming the following:

- (1) *“Respectful and dignified dialogues on complex issues are possible*
- (2) *The unique situation of each member church has to be acknowledged*
- (3) *The LWF is a communion with many themes*
- (4) *The LWF communion as a whole should not take action on issues of family, marriage and sexuality*
- (5) *The LWF journey as a communion of churches continues.”*

## From Bogota to the June 2013 LWF Council Meeting in Geneva

(40) After the Council meeting in Bogota, a new situation developed in January/February 2013 when “the General Assembly of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) ratified previous decisions of the EECMY Council to sever relationships with Church of Sweden and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, following their decision on same-sex marriage/ partnership and ordination of same-sex ministers.”

In the exhibit “LWF Council 2013, Exhibit 9.0.1 “Claiming the Gift of Communion in a Fragmented World,” the General Secretary shared his reflections on the “Emmaus conversation and its further direction. He proposed a discernment process guided by three principles namely:

- (41) affirming the LWF’s self-understanding as a communion of churches;
- (42) offering all three churches a process of accompaniment with a view towards a healing of relationships; and
- (43) moving forward in furthering LWF’s journey as a communion of churches while at the same time addressing the pain resulting from the cut of relationships and the related questions.
- (44) Following a special session at its June 2013 meeting in Geneva, the LWF Council, issued a message<sup>24</sup> in which it:
- (45) called on “all LWF member churches to pray for the three churches and for the entire communion so that relationships are healed;”
- (46) affirmed “the process of accompaniment offered by the Communion Office to the three churches;”
- (47) affirmed the commitment to work together, and therefore asked the General Secretary to provide close contact to the affected member churches, and establish a theological study process to revisit the self-understanding of the LWF as a communion of churches;

---

<sup>24</sup> Message of the Council of the LWF, Geneva, 17 June 2013

- (48) commended the statement “Claiming the gift of communion in a fragmented world” to the LWF member churches for study.
- (49) Looking back since 1995, the LWF journey on these issues contains important lessons for the path ahead. While some of these key lessons are highlighted in earlier paragraphs of this document, especially paragraphs 27 - 28 (under the Executive Committee Meeting in Geneva 24-26 November 2010), others need to be harvested from various LWF contexts.

*Updated on 27 May 2014*