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Public Statement – Women in Ordained Ministry: Our Shared Goal

Called by the liberating grace of God in Christ to speak truth out of love for one another, the Council of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), meeting in Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Germany, June 15-21, 2016, is deeply saddened and concerned by the June 3 decision of the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia (ELCL).

The ELCL, which started women's ordination in 1975, has by constitutional change now restricted the ordained ministry to men and thus has excluded women from full participation in the life of the church. We see this action by the ELCL as a step backward on the common path the LWF has followed for the past 32 years.

Recalling five consecutive LWF Assemblies – from the 7th Assembly in Budapest in 1984 to the 11th Assembly in Stuttgart in 2010 – the communion has urged its member churches to prayerfully discern and affirm women's theological training, their leadership, their ministry, and their full inclusion in the church, both lay and ordained:

“We call on member churches to set appropriate legislation and regulatory policies that enable and ensure women in leadership positions – ordained and lay – and the opportunities to pursue theological education.” (LWF Assembly, Stuttgart, 2010)

While acknowledging that ordination is not a right, but rather a call, we also acknowledge that the restriction and exclusion of women's gifts in and for the church serves to devalue all women and increases their discrimination in both church and society.

While also acknowledging that not all member churches are at the same point on the journey towards women in ordained ministry – that some member churches are still moving toward full inclusion and participation of women – we are convinced that the scriptural witness, in its breadth and scope, honors the equality of all created in God's image and recognizes the gifts of all in the same Spirit to those baptized into the new creation.

Unity in Christ transcends ethnic, social and economic differences: “There is no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). One crucial aspect of this practical expression of the scriptural witness is the full unity of women and men in Christ. In the church the equality of women and

men is expressed and lived out as a sign of God's reign in this world. Therefore, no discrimination of women and men is conceivable in the life of the church. Any kind of discrimination in the way women participate in the ministry of the church (including ordination) harms the fulfilment of the mission of the church in the world, as it is contrary to the nature of God's reign.

We share in the pain and sadness of our sisters and brothers in the ELCL caused by the restriction of ordained ministry to men only. We believe the whole church, and our whole communion, suffers when the gifts of women's ministry are not valued and given full expression.

While we grieve the wound of division within the LWF communion and within the ELCL, we also commit ourselves to accompany our member church through continued bilateral dialogue and relationship, even when it is difficult and disagreement is present. To be in dialogue is a genuine expression of love for one another. We continue to walk in solidarity with our sisters and brothers of the ELCL, to listen to the voices of the women already ordained in the ELCL, and to the Association of Women Theologians of Latvia.

We recall the resolution at our last Assembly in Stuttgart for our member churches to commit "...to genuine, practical, and effective implementation of LWF policies and decisions regarding the full participation of women in the life of the church – and the LWF communion – as well as in society."

Therefore, we urge the ELCL to reconsider their decision so that, together, we may walk again the path toward our shared goal of women in ordained ministry.

As we move toward our commemorations of 500 years of the church being reformed for the sake of the gospel of Christ, we anticipate and would welcome the on-going commitment and re-affirmation of the LWF's long-standing position on women in ordained ministry at the 12th Assembly in Windhoek, Namibia, 2017.