

Upholding Human Dignity: Confronting Human Trafficking

Address to the Lutheran World Federation Council
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“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

Witnessing the new creation in Christ

- (1) “What shall be our witness?” “What story shall we tell?” For the past several weeks I have been asking those questions of members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). They are also appropriate questions for us as we turn toward the Lutheran World Federation assembly and the completion of our tenure in leadership. The significant decisions and discussions we will have in the context of this Council meeting will become part of our shared witness as the Lutheran World Federation.
- (2) The decision regarding the election of the next LWF General Secretary and how we make that decision will have significant impact on the LWF’s future. Our discussions and actions regarding the recommendations of the renewal committee will inform the future witness and work of the LWF. How we remain in respectful and open dialogue with one another even as member churches continue to address issues of marriage, family and human sexuality in their contexts will be an important testimony to our unity in Christ that does not minimize our differences. Paul’s call to the Corinthian church to bear the message and ministry of reconciliation is also spoken to us as the communion of churches that is the Lutheran World Federation.
- (3) The temptation is always to leap to focusing on the ministry of reconciliation given to us and miss the good news that we are a new creation in Christ, our trespasses not held against us. All...all...yes, all of this is from God! This new creation in Christ is not just a patching up of old differences, covering over old divisions but leaving intact the fundamental assumptions and perspectives of existing systems of power and privilege. If the new creation is only that and nothing more, then we remain trapped in systems of domination and exploitation, alienation and marginalization.

- (4) The new creation in Christ is completely new. It is the full dignity of our baptismal life in Christ. It is a liberated resurrection community forgiven and sent to bear witness to the new creation by being engaged in acts of the ministry of reconciliation. Such a ministry calls us to speak the truth of our bondage to sin, to confess that we do not love God with whole heart, mind and strength. Where we fail to love and respect the dignity of our neighbor, the ministry of reconciliation leads us to confront those forces and systems, attitudes and actions that alienate us from God, one another and the creation.
- (5) Two experiences in recent weeks have been powerful reminders of the unity that is ours in Christ and the ministry of reconciliation to which we are called. The first was Dr Ishmael Noko's greeting to the recent meeting of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis. He recalled how the 1957 LWF Assembly was held in Minneapolis under the theme "Christ frees and unites." It was in the midst of doubts, suspicions and fears that Lutherans rediscovered anew what unity means. That true unity is a gift rooted in the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments. Dr Noko reminded us, "This gift is God's own work. And our hands are to serve that unity." Speaking of the 1957 LWF Assembly participants, he said, "They understood that we, therefore, cannot use our hands to pull apart God's costly work...The Church is the Body of Christ, a creature of the Gospel—and, therefore, not ours to dismember." He went on to say, "I believe the whole Christian Church will be well served if Lutherans can provide an example of living together in love, speaking the truth, confessing the faith, and sharing one another's joys, challenges and conflicts." I believe he was describing the ministry of reconciliation to which we are called.
- (6) The second experience was when Archbishop Wilton Gregory sounded a similar theme in his homily at the celebration in Chicago of the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). He did not minimize the challenges we face in our ecumenical relationships. Yet he said they call for deeper conversations and more fervent prayers. In his concluding words I heard Archbishop Gregory, like Paul, calling us to the ministry of reconciliation:
- None of us can clothe ourselves in Christ without putting on the whole Christ. We are made righteous so as to be in a communion of shared love with the whole body of believers from whom we learn so much, and to whom we can give so much if we seek the path of unity. That is Christ's path, and—brothers and sisters—he longs to take us with him. Let us go with him singing for joy! Amen.¹
- (7) As members of the LWF Council, advisers and staff we will take up the work of this Council meeting as part of the continuing ministry of reconciliation to which God calls us and for which Christ frees us.
- (8) To return to my opening question, how will our discussions and decisions bear witness to, and be part of, that ministry of reconciliation? The theme of our meeting—"Upholding

¹Wilton D. Gregory, homily for the Tenth Anniversary Celebration of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, Chicago, Illinois, 1 October 2009.

Human Dignity: Confronting Human Trafficking”—provides an opportunity to express the LWF’s commitment to confront the scandalous realities of our world that call for prophetic diakonia. I invite you to allow this theme to inform our discernment and deliberations in several ways.

- First, as a lens that focuses our vision, that brings renewed clarity and definition;
- Second, as a mirror in which all of us who participate in the social and economic structures that perpetuate this exploitation can see our complicity and accept responsibility for the opportunities and assets that we have;
- Third, as a window through which we can discover the challenges and opportunities before us and their inter-connectedness;
- Fourth, as a door through which we can begin to explore the actions that witness our confident hope in God and faithful compassion for our neighbors in the human community.

A focused look at human trafficking

- (9) If at first mention human trafficking seems a marginal problem in relation to other challenges facing the human community, consider the following.² The United Nations estimates the total market value of illicit human trafficking at \$32 billion. In economic terms this makes trafficking in humans the second largest criminal enterprise in the world following drug dealing.
- (10) However, the more sobering data on the scope of this activity reveals the number of human lives involved. Although the nature of the crime makes it difficult to estimate, conservative estimates of the number of people trafficked world-wide begin at over 12 million people. Some estimates are as high as 27 million.
- (11) These numbers do *not* include those who have been trafficked within the borders of their own country. That fact is significant because a study of detected cases, published in 2008 by the United Nations, indicates that intra-regional trafficking in persons was predominant in most countries. In many countries most of the demand is met internally.
- (12) The kinds of trafficking and the reasons for it vary. As defined by the United Nations, human trafficking includes recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining a person to be

² The statistical information regarding human trafficking presented here is from the following sources: “Human Trafficking: the facts,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/blueheart/Fact_sheet_english.pdf>; “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons,” United Nations, 2008, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Global_Report_on_TIP.pdf>; “Trafficking in Persons Report 2009,” U.S. State Department, 2009, <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/123357.pdf>>.

used for labor or services through force, fraud or coercion³ that result in involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. The results of this trafficking include the exploitation of sweatshops, forced labor, child labor and begging, organ removal, and child soldiers.

- (13) However, it is estimated that over 80% of human trafficking is related to the sexual exploitation of adults through force, fraud or coercion or the sexual exploitation of any kind apart from force, fraud or coercion with a person who is under 18 years of age. Women and girls constitute 80% of the victims and 15-20% are children. In other words, the effects of human trafficking are experienced disproportionately by the people who often are most vulnerable and who have little if any recourse.

A reflection in the mirror

- (14) An understandable reaction to this shocking information is to continue to focus on both victims and perpetrators, either as individuals or as classes of people, in ways that distance us from them and from our own involvement. It is easy to feel pity for the victims of economic and sexual exploitation, especially when we hear or read the heart-wrenching story of an abused individual. Similarly, it is easy to feel righteous anger against villainous individuals who commit outrageous cruelties. However, we are not gathered here to do only the easy work.
- (15) The more difficult work begins with exchanging the lens of detached analysis for the mirror of honest communal reflection. A true understanding of human trafficking must include an honest recognition that this state of affairs could not exist and would not continue apart from our tolerance and even encouragement of the social and economic structures that allow and contribute to human trafficking.
- Where consumer appetites and profit motives are paramount and unquestioned, the demands for low cost goods and services invite exploitative labor practices.
 - Where powerful commercial interests are privileged and unaccountable, the risks of prosecution for human trafficking are negligible to non-existent.
 - Where poverty is ignored, the desperation that makes people vulnerable to intimidation and false promises thrives.
 - Where racism and sexism are tolerated, the strength to resist and oppose even the most blatant forms of exploitation is diminished.
- (16) In other words, the truth is that we are all involved. We all are consumers in a global economy that exploits cheap labor. We all have individual and collective voices to address

³Force includes beatings or other physical injuring, rape, confinement, etc.; fraud includes false offers of work (for example, waiting tables, modeling, construction), misrepresentation of conditions, and the like; coercion includes threat of abuse of the legal system, threat of harm to any person (victim, family or others), and simple fear

the modern leaders of government, industry, and commerce, as Martin Luther once addressed the German nobility. We can choose to speak and act for good or for ill; but, having made an honest review in the mirror, we cannot pretend that we are not involved.

A window for theological imagination

- (17) The honest review in the mirror, though unsettling, can stir our thinking to liberating discoveries as well. Seeing the extent of our involvement, the complex ways that human trafficking intersects with our lives, need not end simply in a judgment of complicity. In the same way that looking through a window with new perspective can lead to fresh discoveries, so also the awareness of the interconnectedness of human trafficking with larger social structures and our involvement in them has the power to stir our imaginations and to discover new meaning in our witness and service as a communion of churches.
- (18) In particular, we have the opportunity to engage this issue and related ones with a theological witness whose depth is greater than the insights that could be gained only from a philosophical or socio-political analysis. Conventionally, human trafficking is viewed as a violation of the value that is inherent in every human person. Most commonly Christians link this conviction with the theological teaching that humankind is created *imago dei*, in the image of God.
- (19) However, Christians have a profound and rich witness that mirrors the complexity and depth of the issues involved with human trafficking. It is a witness that goes far beyond a simple affirmation of human value envisioned either from a secular viewpoint or even from a theistic tradition that sees in human beings a mirror of God's own dignity.
- (20) The dignity that human creatures enjoy in God's creation is more than a simple or abstract affirmation of value. The human creatures that God created have a *calling* within God's creation, *a calling in relationship* to God and God's other creatures. This calling is to care for the creation and nurture its vitality (Genesis 1, 2). It is a calling with God's own mandate, a calling that is violated wherever humans are enslaved to other, fraudulent masters. This calling is violated wherever the freedom to serve with all one's heart, soul, and strength is limited, regardless of the justifications offered (even religious ones).
- (21) Even deeper, however, is the dignity God has given to human life when the Word became flesh, when Jesus forgivingly embraced sinners and outcasts, when Jesus, not counting equality with God a thing to be grasped, emptied himself (Philippians 2:6-7) and even became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). The *new* creation is more than a simple ratification of the original created dignity and calling; it is a new life in Christ. And so, the God who brings humankind into the life of the new creation also entrusts a new calling, the ministry of reconciliation, and in service of this ministry Christians are called to travel to the ends of the earth as ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20; Acts

1:8). This ambassadorial calling on behalf of Christ's reconciliation is violated wherever and whenever human trafficking disrupts and subverts the glorious freedom of the children of God in the new creation (Romans 8:21).

- (22) Moreover, the Spirit gives gifts and binds the faithful in a community of mutual love and service — the Body of Christ. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). The very life and calling of this community is violated wherever trafficking for the purposes of forced and demeaning servitude undermines or prevents the “building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13).

A doorway for people of evangelical courage

- (23) This brief Trinitarian sketch illustrates how an evangelical theological imagination can view the larger complex of social relationships and societal challenges. With eyes no longer blinkered by a denial of our own involvement, we are liberated to address this lamentably familiar challenge with fresh insights for renewed action.
- (24) Here are a few examples of how a focused and honest look at human trafficking opens the doorway to renewed action.
- (25) *Stewardship of the creation.* The assertion of human dignity is an essential component of the Christian witness in society, but Christian witness and action confronting human trafficking need not be limited to a simple assertion of social status. Where trafficking diverts stewards of the creation from their proper callings in communities and homes, in work and relationships, it steals from God's own creation-stewarding workforce. Where legal and economic slavery, where exploitative and abusive labor practices cause physical, emotional and spiritual injury, God's creation itself is violated. To work toward the end of human trafficking is to contribute to the faithful stewardship of God's creation.
- (26) *Privilege and justice.* The enormous profitability of human trafficking and the unlikelihood of prosecution reveals the corrupting systemic effects of privilege based on wealth, race and gender. Where economic policy and political authority reinforce the power of the privileged to exploit those who are economically and politically marginalized, the injustice is against the one who is present in those who are hungry, naked, imprisoned (Matthew 25). To work toward the end of human trafficking and the dismantlement of privileged power based on racism and sexism is to join Jesus in his generous embrace of the disenfranchised.
- (27) *Peace and reconciliation.* The physical violence of human trafficking is all the more devastating, especially when associated with sexual exploitation, because it destroys the most

intimate and primary relationships of human community and because it creates deep psychic scars that diminish the capacity for trust on which the hope of future community depends. To work toward the end and remediation of this violence is to serve the cause of peace. At the same time it demonstrates the need and opportunity for ministry that serves reconciliation in a witness of God's forgiveness in Christ.

- (28) *Communion in the Body of Christ.* The recent expansion of global inter-connectivity and relationships in communications and commerce continues to fuel a debate regarding "globalism," and the abuse of human trafficking is one instance of many that have led some to despair of any lasting or meaningful value in global relationships and commerce. Where human abuses of communication, travel and commerce have suppressed the glorious freedom of the children of God whose witness is awaited with eager expectation by a creation longing for freedom (Romans 8:19-21), there the Spirit's liberating work is opposed. To reclaim the instruments of communication, travel and commerce from their abuse, to reclaim opportunities for a vibrant witness and courageous service in partnership with Christians around the world, is to live in the power of the Spirit who is bringing the new creation to the ends of the earth.

Thinking and Acting Anew

- (29) We are living in a time that calls for evangelical, missional imagination. The ministry of reconciliation in a fractious, contentious and polarized world calls for nothing less. The temptation is for us to become immobilized by the magnitude of the social, economic, environmental issues we face—human trafficking being but one example. The danger is we can become turned inward allowing our differences over human sexuality to divide us thus muting the clarity of our proclaiming Christ and diminishing our capacity to be engage together in the ministry of reconciliation.
- (30) This year our sisters and brothers in Christ in the Reformed communion observe the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth, and Geneva marks the 450th anniversary of the founding of the academy that became the University of Geneva. This history serves as a reminder that this community has been a place of refuge for people whose religious convictions or other reasons have placed them in danger. We are grateful for the hospitality of this community and for the opportunity to share in the inheritance of this legacy. It shows us that where such refuge is given, where the threat of physical violence and abuse or economic exclusion and exploitation is restrained, where a community was willing to think and act anew in a witness of evangelical courage, a common life of peace and prosperity can flourish. Could it be that we are also being called to think and act anew?
- (31) The questions remain. What shall be our witness? What story shall we tell?

ADDENDUM
TO THE
PRESIDENT'S REPORT TO THE LWF COUNCIL
OCTOBER 21, 2009

- (1) I begin my oral report to you with the same questions with which I began my sermon and report to our recent ELCA churchwide assembly. Those questions are: What shall be our witness? What story shall we tell?
- (2) We have been answering these questions during our tenure in leadership since 2003. The report from Winnipeg – Stuttgart becomes a significant part of our response to them.
- (3) Yet, the decisions that lie before us at this Council meeting and in the coming months will also contribute to our answer. I recognize that there is always a tendency to overestimate the significance of decisions and leadership when placed in the context of the history of the Christian Church or the almost 500-year history of the ongoing Lutheran Reformation. Nevertheless, in these final months of our leadership terms, we have the opportunity to make a significant witness.
- (4) The future of the LWF will be shaped greatly by our decision regarding the next LWF General Secretary. The person whom we elect must be confident of our full support, our prayers and our encouragement for the challenging years that lie ahead.
- (5) Our conversations, decisions and recommendations in response to the Renewal Committee Report will become part of the story we tell. As other Christian World Communions and Councils of Churches are calling for similar renewal processes, it is clear that our work was begun at the right time. This has been a very participatory process with each subsequent version of the Renewal Committee's Report reflecting the contributions of the member churches.
- (6) The recommendations we make should reflect both the wisdom that comes from our years of leadership and our commitment to a sustainable and strong LWF in the future. They should reflect our having taken seriously rapidly changing contexts, economies and LWF funding streams, as well as membership changes in Lutheran churches and the ecumenical and interfaith landscapes.
- (7) It is my commitment that when we leave this meeting, we will have clarity and transparency about the recommendations we are making, including a timetable and process for developing the language of proposed changes to governing documents. I believe we also must be clear about what decisions we believe will be left for future elected Council members and the Geneva Secretariat to take.
- (8) Our actions on the Renewal Committee Report are inseparable from our continuing stewardship of LWF financial resources. I believe that we have exercised responsible fiduciary leadership given the volatility in the global economy and the serious changes in the financial resources of member churches and their support of the LWF.

- (9) Now and in the coming months, we face even greater challenges. I share the example of one member church. The ELCA will be facing a significant decrease in its budget from which support for the LWF comes. We are experiencing a 30-year trend in decreased membership and giving to support the work of the ELCA beyond its local congregations. We are also living with decreased giving as a consequence of the volatility in the economy over the past 12 months. Furthermore, we do not know the budgetary implications of our recent decision on human sexuality. Regrettably, these factors will lead to a decrease in our contributions to the LWF. I describe our ELCA situation as one example of changing giving patterns in member churches that will impact the LWF. We need to hear from other churches, including those with the ability to increase their financial support of the LWF.
- (10) All of this means that we need to adopt a budget that reflects these changes, keeps the LWF sustainable and supports the priorities we have set for the LWF. In the future, we must consult with one another regarding the size and structure of the Geneva Secretariat.
- (11) I also believe that we have failed to make the generating of new resources a high enough priority for our leadership. Too often we have left this to the Secretariat or the member churches, rather than exercising leadership ourselves. I understand that we come from very different contexts and need to respect cultures of giving. However, I also believe that we could be more assertive in raising individual gifts and pledges to the LWF Endowment Fund. Let us be more strategic; may this become a higher priority for us in the coming months.
- (12) We must address the way in which the member churches' discussions and decisions on marriage, family and sexuality will impact the life, work and unity of the LWF. I say this both as LWF president and presiding bishop of the ELCA, an LWF member church that has taken significant actions on human sexuality in recent months.
- (13) In a world and a current ecumenical and interfaith climate that often deem these issues and questions to provide the basis for polarization and division, we as the LWF have the opportunity to provide a different witness. That witness begins by our recognizing and honoring the Guidelines for Processes and Dialogue on Marriage, Family and Sexuality that we adopted in Lund in 2007.
- (14) These guidelines have been very helpful for us in the ELCA as we have kept global companion churches informed throughout our process of study, our recommendations and actions. We receive and need the comments, criticisms and pastoral concerns of LWF member churches offered in the spirit of accompaniment. ELCA participants in this meeting are available for conversations with you.
- (15) Rather than making marriage, family and sexuality the cause for distancing ourselves from one another in the LWF, let us resolve to engage in deeper dialogue on the theological and ethical issues raised in our current discussions and decisions by member churches.

- (16) I believe these questions include, but are not limited to:
- What do we as Lutherans mean when we speak of the Word of God?
 - How do we understand the authority of Scripture? Can we be renewed in our understanding of the power of God's Word to author – that is, to create justifying and living faith in Jesus Christ?
 - How do we read and interpret the Scriptures evangelically? Do we have agreement on hermeneutical principles as we move from the text of Scripture to the contexts of our lives and ministries?
 - Can we be renewed in our commitment to deepening our fluency in what Martin Luther called “the highest art form among Christians,” distinguishing between Law and Gospel?
 - What does it mean to be faithful to Scripture and the Confessions?
 - How do we remain engaged in conversations with ecumenical and interfaith partners?
 - Is there a possibility to apply the ecumenical principle of differentiated consensus to our perspectives on human sexuality?
- (17) There are many thoughtful questions raised and helpful insights and suggestions offered in the LWF Task Force Report on Marriage, Family and Sexuality and the Guidelines for Processes and Dialogue. As we follow these recommendations in coming months and during our assembly, we will offer a powerful witness to our unity in Christ within diversity.
- (18) As member churches, regions and the assembly prepare to elect those who will lead the LWF, let us renew our commitment to women in leadership. This priority for the LWF was made recognizing that patriarchal power remains strong in church and society. We need to give strong leadership as Council members affirming and admonishing one another so that gender justice becomes a growing reality throughout the LWF. We rejoice that four LWF member churches recently voted to ordain women.
- (19) Given all that is before us in the coming months, we might be tempted to become too focused inward on the life and future of the LWF. Yet, a world that experiences daily the ravages of war and violence calls for our renewed commitment to be builders of peace with justice. Many places of conflict call us to sustained engagement as peacemakers. Perhaps few are as urgent as the Middle East. Let us renew our resolve to accompany the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land so that there might be an end to occupation, a cessation of violence and a viable, lasting, just and peaceful Palestine and Israel.
- (20) As people migrate, searching for refuge from war, natural disasters and famine, let us continue the LWF's strong commitment to be engaged in diaconal work. May “Diakonia in Context” become a living document for our churches as together we grow in our understanding and practice of diakonia. Let us renew our commitment to reduce the stigma and spread of HIV/AIDS and let us increase our resolve to end the spread of malaria. Our assembly theme, “Give Us Today our Daily Bread,” gives us the opportunity to continue to confront hunger as a humanitarian crisis calling for compassion and justice.
- (21) The creation continues to groan in travail under the weight of our destructive, consumptive living. The environmental work of member churches and our commitment to eco-justice

exemplified in our Arusha meeting must not become secondary to the many challenges we face as a communion or within the member churches.

- (22) The growing interest in and commitment to interfaith relationships provide a marvelous opportunity for our engagement. With Bishop Munib Younan, I recently participated in the Georgetown University Conference on the Common Word message from global Islamic scholars and leaders to leaders of Christian churches. It was the clear consensus of participants that our common words must lead to common deeds as Christians and Muslims engage in diapraxis in local communities. We, as LWF member churches, can provide leadership in this shared endeavor. It is just one example of how, through dialogue and action, we can provide an alternative to the rhetoric and actions of religious extremists.
- (23) As interest in interreligious relationships grows, it should not come at the expense of our commitment to ecumenism. The celebration this month of the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification became an occasion to thank God for this significant milestone and to renew our commitment to dialogue, so that one day the unity we have with Christians through baptism might be experienced together at Christ's table of the Eucharist.
- (24) Finally, even as we continue to provide strong leadership in the coming months, let us take time to give thanks to God for the leadership of Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, those who serve the LWF in Geneva and throughout the world and for one another. It is truly a joy and honor to serve with you.