



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND – FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL – FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

BOUND TOGETHER

A Message from the European Consultation on HIV/AIDS

We, representatives of European member churches of the Lutheran World Federation—including bishops, pastors, lay members—men, women and youth from diverse backgrounds, professions such as medical and social work, and many of whom are involved in the diaconal work of the churches—met 20-25 April, 2004, in Odessa, Ukraine, to consider how God is calling us to respond and act in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

This consultation grew out of the LWF Action Plan, *“Compassion, Conversion, Care: Responding as churches to the HIV/AIDS pandemic”* and commitments made at the Tenth LWF Assembly, and follows similar consultations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

It was significant that we met in Ukraine where the prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS is currently among the highest in the region. Here, the most frequent transmission of the virus occurs through injecting drugs; transmission through sexual intercourse is predominant elsewhere but also increasing here. During our consultation we personally realized our own sense of helplessness and were deeply moved by the realities of the people we encountered who are living with HIV/AIDS.

We met a week prior to May 1, 2004, when ten additional countries will officially enter the European Union (EU). Although there are great expectations associated with this, there is also much anxiety regarding the implications of this new line of demarcation in Europe. For example, countries entering the EU will no longer have access to lower cost generic medication to treat those infected with the HIV virus, and will be cut off from some international funding for their programs.

Countries and churches who have been experiencing growing relations with one another as neighbors, are likely to find themselves divided again from one another, based on who is included in or excluded from this new political union. Migration of people across borders is likely to increase, giving rise to new fears and challenges. At a time such as this when so much attention in Europe is oriented toward becoming more like the West, it is especially strategic for churches here in Europe to turn their attention toward the eastern and southeastern parts of the region, where more difficult conditions of life continue to prevail. As churches in communion with one another, we are called to stand in solidarity with those who continue to suffer in many ways, including through the growing incidence of HIV/AIDS in many of these countries. We recognize that this specific focus of our consultation is also related to other economic and cultural factors, especially the negative



forces of globalization and the weakening of families and other social structures that give meaning, values and direction to life.

The enormous economic, educational, cultural and other disparities in the world are manifest among us as Lutheran churches across Europe. In some of our countries, the spreading of HIV/AIDS has been effectively contained, while in others it is escalating. Some churches have developed extensive, effective programs to care for and support persons affected by HIV/AIDS, while others have barely begun. Some of our churches are large in terms of size and resources, but others are small minority churches with meager resources, seeking to discern what it means to be the church amid radically new political and cultural realities. Whereas some resent negative cultural influences that seem to have come from the west, others resent the trafficking of drugs and people that seems to have come from the east.

What is important, however, is the growing realization that through the empowering work of God's Spirit, we have been gathered together as a communion of churches, such that the suffering and challenges of some are shared by all. Thus, we are bound together and called to seek new ways of living out the reality of this communion, in listening carefully to and learning from one another, and in sharing our resources in ways that respect our different identities, values and priorities, rather than the stronger partners imposing theirs on the weaker.

HIV/AIDS is an example that evokes some of our theological differences, including how we interpret the Bible, approach challenges in our societies and reach out to others. These differences require more extensive consideration that goes far beyond the topic of this consultation.

What we share is a common motivation to act so as to make a difference in the lives of those affected by and living with HIV/AIDS. The many biblical stories of how Jesus reached out to others—especially those who were poor, sick or outcast—are what motivate us to respond, sharing the love we know through Christ Jesus with our countless neighbors in need.

Therefore, we encourage our churches to give urgent, intensive attention to and to take proactive actions to:

- ***Learn*** the facts about HIV/AIDS, how it is transmitted, the reality and actual needs of the people who are affected, and how to speak more openly about HIV/AIDS and related topics in our churches, families and communities. In order to “break the silence,” we need to be more attentive to religious, social and cultural barriers that have contributed to the silence. This should occur at all levels of the churches’ educational programs, in languages easily understood by all. Priority should be given to reaching youth, through confirmation classes and other youth programs, and to involve them in decision-making processes.
- ***Be the Church*** in relating to those affected by HIV/AIDS. Churches have a distinct responsibility to address the various spiritual dimensions at stake in sensitive and appropriate ways. This includes reaching out and receiving into our churches those who are affected, especially those who have often been treated as “outsiders” or stigmatized as outcasts. Churches must become “safe places” for such persons; what they share must be treated confidentially. Liturgies, sermons and prayers of the church should lift up those affected.
- ***Deepen theological reflection*** through more biblically grounded theological learning, discernment and discussion in order to respond from out of the gospel of Jesus Christ that we proclaim and seek to live out. This especially should be given attention in the theological education of clergy and other members of the church.
- ***Provide specialized training*** in pastoral care, counseling, youth and diaconal work so that education, prevention, and care in relation to HIV/AIDS can be more effective.

- **Care for and support** all who are affected by HIV/AIDS. This is an aspect of the diaconal calling of the church, not only by those specially designated for this work but also as a part of the baptismal call of all Christians.
- **Promote prevention** through such means as gender equality, sexuality education (abstaining from and postponing sexual activity among youth, avoiding risky behavior, use of condoms), sterilized and disposable needles, clean blood supply and other measures to avoid spreading the virus.
- **Teach Christian values** that promote and protect life, based on love for self and neighbor. Churches should teach values that support marriage and family life, as well as mutual sexual responsibility and faithfulness to one another.
- **Advocate** for the human rights of persons with HIV/AIDS, and for policies and practices that will be effective in supporting them and their needs, for example, access to medication.
- **Collaborate** with other churches, ecumenical organizations, non-governmental organizations, governments, and self-help groups from local to international levels so as to increase the impact of our joint efforts to diminish the spread of HIV/AIDS, to care for and to pursue justice for and with all those affected.

We challenge ourselves and the leaders of our churches (e.g., at the upcoming European Church Leaders Consultation) to speak out and follow up on these matters with concrete plans for action in local settings, and in partnerships of sharing with those with whom we are bound together here in Europe, and throughout the world.

We seek to carry this out empowered by the Spirit of the One who brings new hope and life in the face of suffering and death.

(Edited final version after consultation of participants) 6th July 2004