

A Call for Churches Critically to Engage with Governments

A consultation of members of LWF churches from around the world (in Argentina, Canada, Hong Kong–China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Liberia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Namibia, Philippines, Taiwan–Republic of China, South Africa, United States, Zambia, Zimbabwe), met October 19-21, 2009 at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva for a DTS-convened consultation on the theme, “Churches Holding Governments Accountable.”

Theological grounds for holding governments accountable:

We recalled some of the misleading messages that have discouraged Christians from engaging with the political realm. In his explanation of the 4th commandment, Luther advocated rulers being obeyed as are fathers. Many Christians today feel that the church should not get involved in politics; religion and politics don’t mix. There is fear that the church will be divided, or that partisan politics will be brought into the church, or that the church will be co-opted by the government for its own interests.

On the other hand, we considered the theological bases for churches’ critical engagement with government, grounded in Scripture and in the Lutheran understanding of “two-kingdoms.” This tradition recognizes that God is active not only through spiritual means, but also through secular arenas such as governments. Earthly government is intended to be a means through which God works to sustain and further life in community. Good government is a blessing, and necessary for ordering life in community. Yet as are all earthly institutions, governments are also permeated by sin, often neglect the common good, and sometimes become oppressive or tyrannical. Thus, the church, along with others in civil society, must remain alert to and be critical of any governments when they violate human rights, and fall short of furthering the common good. Governments should be valued, but also not completely trusted. From a Lutheran perspective, we seek not to make government “Christian” but to keep it secular so that that the God-intended good of all can be pursued through this realm.

Furthermore, an important calling of the church is to equip its members to pursue their baptismal vocation through active citizenship, engaging with governments, perhaps also by serving in government. Special attention needs to be given to how we as churches are preparing the young for active and effective citizenship. As churches seek to hold governments accountable, it is important that we do so with accurate information and a sense of humility, seeing that as churches we also fall short and must be held accountable.

Participants, who were mostly from Africa and Asia, shared observations such as the following:

“My whole life has been shaped by government...A totally illegitimate government took away my dignity, but it was through the church that I could become who I am.”

Many societies lack basic security, food, and conditions necessary for sustaining life; often, public resources are being mismanaged. How can governments be held accountable for this? Governments have become too beholden to economic interests that are exploiting a country’s land and resources, and need to be held accountable for redressing the extreme disparities between rich and poor. We recognize that corruption and inequities are problems in the North as well as South.

Governments appreciate the diaconal work of the churches, but not necessarily when churches speak out. If church members expose abuses or corruption in some countries, they fear they will be silenced or killed. The most repressive governments tend to be the ones who are reluctant to abide by internationally recognized human rights standards. Governments tend to resist being held accountable; unaccountability can lead to fear, manipulation, corruption and tyranny.

Those who were a country's liberators may later become its oppressors; the cycle of oppressed and oppressor needs to be broken. New challenges are involved in shifting from living under governments that are hostile to churches toward living under those that may be friendlier toward churches.

In contexts where Christians are a small minority, the public involvement of churches sometimes is suspected of being for the purpose of converting those of other faiths. Churches can only challenge government on a secular basis, such as the constitution, not on explicitly Christian bases.

In some settings, citizens are not able to come together and speak about government matters, much less critique government. It is crucial that space be carved out and preserved for churches and others to address what government is doing or failing to do.

There also is the need to understand the political life cycle of governments, and which approaches and strategies are most appropriate and effective at different stages.

Churches and church leaders must be held more accountable:

Holding governments accountable is one of the crucial means through which we bear witness to our faith – to assure that this arena genuinely serves the good of all people, regardless of their faith or lack of belief. Most basically, this bearing witness begins by telling what is happening on the ground, in the actual lives of people; it is an expression of love for the neighbor. Yet in our churches there frequently is lack of theological clarity as to why and how Christians and churches are to do so.

Pastors often are uninformed, unable to articulate the issues at stake, not seeing this as a central aspect of what the church's witness entails. Many church leaders are unable to speak in ways that will be effective in the public arena, and/or lack theological understandings that readily engage these realities, including in their sermons. Too often, church leaders have failed to bear public witness to God's purposes for the common good in their societies, as an important expression of their faith. Churches were key in dismantling apartheid, for example, but since then, some of them have slacked off in holding government accountable.

Churches need accurate, up-to-date information if they are to engage governments with integrity. For example, what agreements have governments signed, and how can we access the information we need? Churches often feel they lack the information and analysis they need to hold government accountable. We affirm that citizens have the right to information about their governments' activities. People feel unable to participate in or engage with governments, or even lack basic knowledge about their human rights that governments are obliged to respect. We heard of the many strategic kinds of information that can be accessed and effectively used in different contexts to hold governments accountable. Churches need to learn from one another in discerning which approaches would be most appropriate in particular circumstances (“wise as serpents, gentle as doves”).

Some churches are able to dialogue with government about changes needed, based on long and mostly positive relationships with government, including making policy recommendations. Churches have participated in forming transitional governments and in peace-building efforts. Some church members and pastors have served in government. Many Christians (even Lutherans) serve in top government positions.

Churches should not just ask what we want government to do for us, but also assess how we will work in critical partnership on all levels with governments to uphold the common good. Churches need to understand how governments actually work, the kinds of assumptions, worldviews, self-interests they have, and the different kinds of “capital” (political, social and moral) that churches can bring to their exchanges with government.

Churches tend to be slow in identifying or working with potential allies, especially those of other faiths. They feel they lack the capacity or are too small to hold governments accountable, yet some small churches are making important impacts through their participation in ecumenical, interfaith and civil society coalitions.

As a global communion and bearing in mind the effects of globalization, we affirm that challenges increasingly need to be addressed across national boundaries. For example, the migration of people between Asian countries means that, in addition to receiving them as brothers and sisters, churches there need to press for fair and humane policies for migrant workers, as well as calling governments from which they have migrated to redress their unjust policies toward them. Coordinated regional approaches are needed.

Churches continually need to be vigilant with regards to government. There is the danger of churches collaborating too closely with government. We must be able to discern when to say “yes” and when to say “no” to governments.

Thus we call for

The distribution of “A Call for Churches Critically to Engage with Governments” to all LWF member churches, who are encouraged to have dialogue and training events on these matters.

The development of a resource, through DTS, drawing on insights and needs identified through this consultation, that can be a basis for capacity development regarding these matters in member churches.

Theologians and others with related areas of expertise to give more in-depth attention to how Lutheran theological understandings regarding the relationship between churches and governments need to be reconsidered, revised, and elaborated in light of the above kinds of realities.